192 Pages

ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION

JUNE 1987
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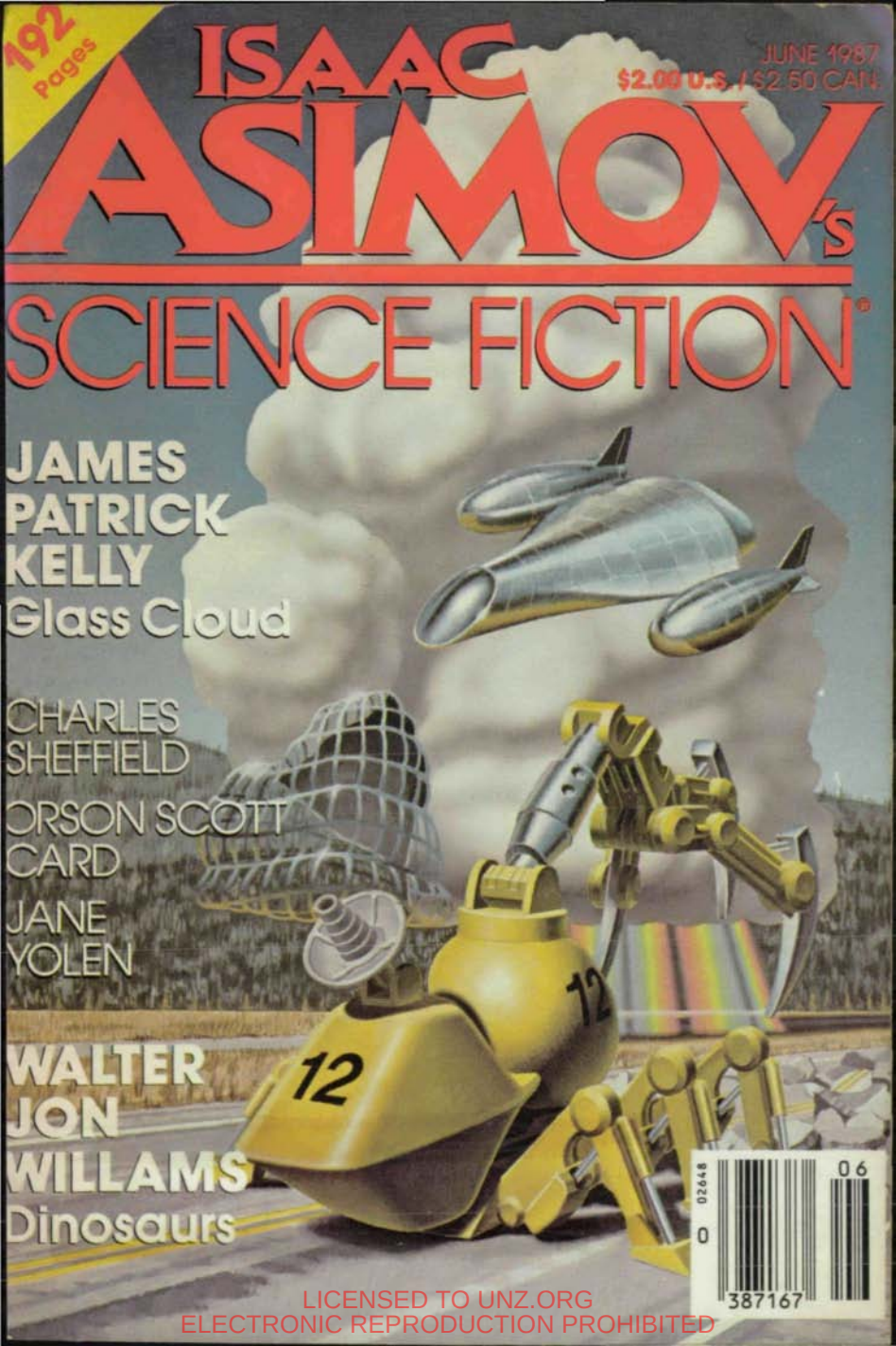

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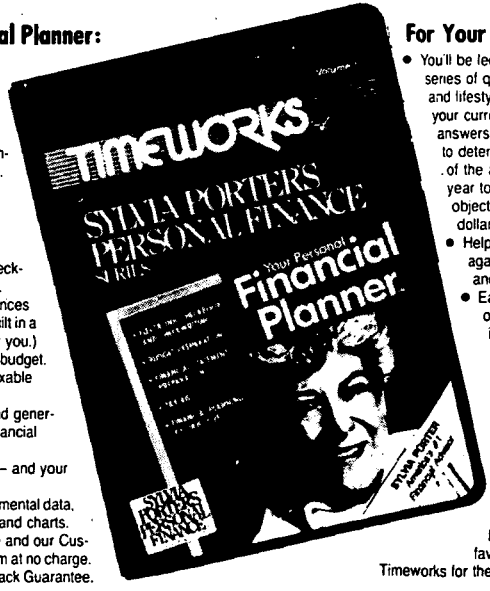

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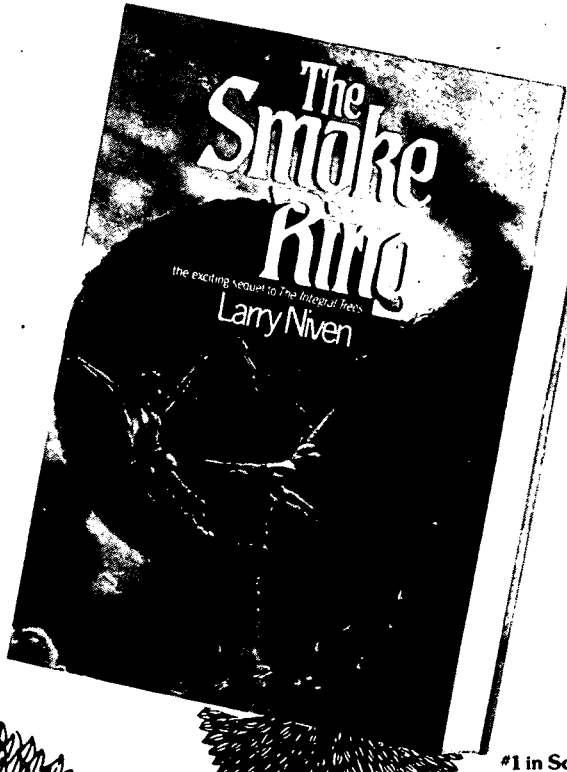

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EDITORIAL

FORGETFULNESS

by Isaac Asimov

In the June 1937 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction*, John W. Campbell, Jr., writing under the name of Don A. Stuart, had a story entitled "Forgetfulness." The passage of fifty years has not dimmed my memory of that story.

Briefly, it is about a spaceship in need of repairs that makes a forced landing on an unknown planet. The planet had a very advanced technology; there are enormous machines everywhere. The population, however, has apparently completely forgotten the purpose of the machines and has no knowledge of how to run them. The crew of the spaceship is frustrated. Clearly, they have the means to hand to repair their ship, if only the inhabitants of the planet hadn't degenerated into ignorance.

Finally, the crew of the spaceship manage to make their needs clear to the inhabitants who say, "Well, why didn't you say so?" fix the machine, and send them on their way with no visible effort. They had progressed far beyond the machines and made use of a far more etherealized technology that was incomprehensible to the spacemen.

The spacemen puzzled over how it could be that the inhabitants, who were not degenerate after all but who were enormously advanced, could have forgotten about the machines.

And one of them said something like this, "Why not? Can you remember how to make a stone axe? Do you know just what stone is the right one for the axehead, and what stone to use for the chipping, and how to chip it, or flake it, in order to get a sharp edge? When you no longer need a technology, you forget it."

That impressed me, and I wove forgetfulness into a number of my stories. In my story "The Feeling of Power," the universal use of computers made people forget how to solve arithmetical problems on paper. And in my two recent Foundation novels: *Foundation's Edge* and *Foundation and Earth*, I made a big deal over the fact that human beings had forgotten the location of Earth and weren't even sure that it ever actually existed.

I got a letter from a reader who was anxious to prove that I was not a sensible person. One of the pieces of evidence he presented in support

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of his case was that it was impossible for people in the future to forget the existence and location of Earth.

Alas, he underestimates the power of forgettery. We have carefully evolved an efficient mechanism for forgetting as a matter of survival. If we remembered everything we observed, learned, and deduced at all times, we would rapidly clog our brain to the point of uselessness.

I, myself, have an excellent memory, as memories go. For instance, I remember all the details that led up to my first meeting with the woman who became my first wife. The details were dramatic and entertaining and I told the story frequently. And then one day I sat down to write my autobiography and did it with my diary at hand. (I've been keeping one for nearly fifty years.) To my disbelief and astonishment, I found some of the key items in my story to be *wrong*.

On another occasion, I wrote in my diary that that day had been unbelievably horrible. "I won't bother to write the details," I said, "for never, never, never will I forget them." Need I tell you that I drew a complete blank. I haven't the faintest idea what happened. In fact, without my diary I couldn't possibly have written an accurate autobiography. I would have gotten some of the most fundamental things wrong and, I repeat, I have an excellent memory.

But those are personal matters.

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What about history? Surely we're not going to forget details about famous events in history.

Oh, no? The most famous event in Greek history was the Trojan War. The Greeks never stopped talking about it. What's more the Homeric epics and all the subsidiary tales caught the interest of the Romans, and the post-Roman west. Who hasn't read about Paris and Helen of Troy, about Achilles and Hector, and so on?

Good! So where is Troy? Would you believe that no one knew. It was somewhere in northwestern Turkey, but the exact location was a matter of dispute. A German amateur archeologist, Heinrich Schliemann, who lived and breathed the Homeric tales, followed descriptions in the *Iliad*, dug into a mound near the town of Hissarlik and announced the location of Troy in 1873. The "search for Troy" made an exciting TV documentary only a few months ago, and I didn't see that as very different from the "search for Earth" I have been describing.

Here's another case. To the ancient Romans, *the* war was the Second Punic War against Hannibal. It was a war against odds, filled with defeat. The Romans held out doggedly, however, and finally won. In the last battle at Zama, the Roman general Scipio smashed Hannibal and the war was over. It was to the Romans what the Battle of Waterloo was to the British, the Battle of Gettyburg to us, the Battle of Stalingrad to the Soviets.

So where is Zama? Would you believe that no one knows. Well, honestly, no one knows. It has never been located. Its identity and position on the map have been totally forgotten.

But that's ancient history, right? The Trojan War was fought over three thousand years ago, and the Battle of Zama was fought well over two thousand years ago.

Then, how about Columbus? On October 12, 1492, he landed on an island off the coast of North America and that is the day of the "discovery of America." We celebrate it every year and in a few years we will celebrate the semi-millennial of the discovery, the five-hundredth anniversary.

The island on which Columbus landed was called "Guanahani," or something like that, by those who lived on it, but Columbus placed no value on that. He named the island "San Salvador" ("Holy Savior.")

Fine! Comes the semi-millennial celebration, will we be sending people to the island to weep patriotically over the great event? Well, not exactly. No island by the name of "San Salvador" exists on the map. We have actually forgotten which island it was that Columbus landed on. The popular guess is that it is "Watling's Island," named after an English pirate, John Watling. This island, part of the Bahamas, lies well to the east of the island group, which is what makes it reasonable to suppose that it represents Columbus' first landfall, but we don't really *know*.

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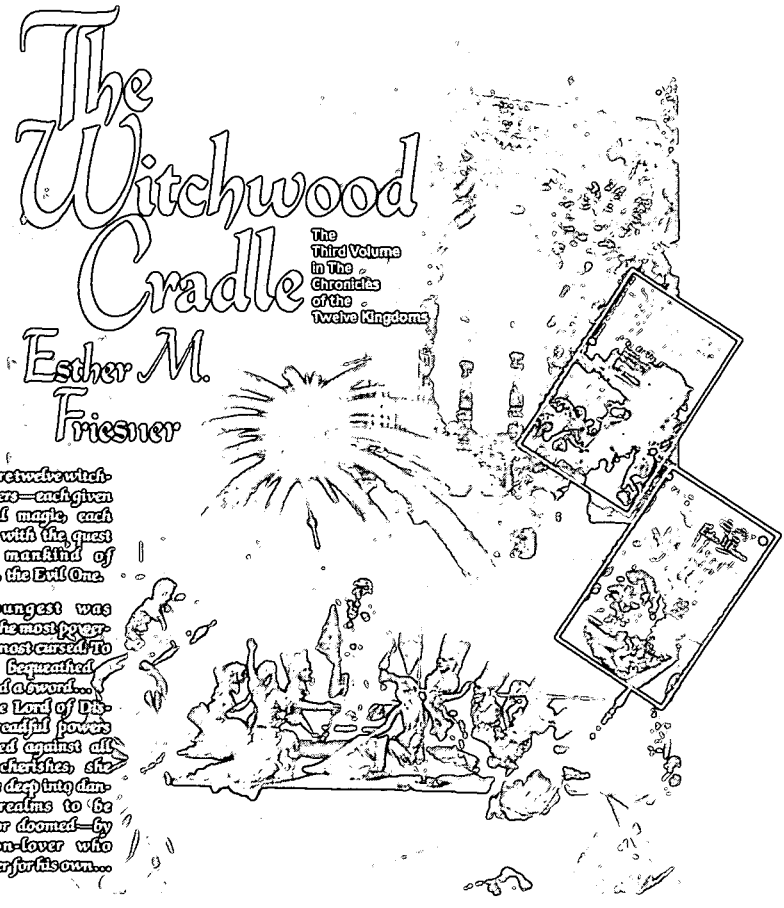
BEASTS, MAGIC, SWORDS OF DEATH... AND THE WITCHBORN...



There were twelve witch-born sisters—each given a special magic, each charged with the quest to rid mankind of Morgulf, the Evil One.

The youngest was Basoni the most powerful, and most cursed. To her was bequeathed secret and a sword... When the Lord of Dispair's dreadful powers are loosed against all Basoni cherishes, she must flee deep into dangerous realms to be saved—or doomed—by a demon-lover who claims her for his own...

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The Chronicles of the Twelve Kingdoms were begun in Mustapha and His Wise Dog, and Spells of Mortal Weaving.

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In the vastly overrated book *1984*, George Orwell describes a future in which one of the great industries is that of rewriting history. I laughed loud and long at that one. Who on Earth has to rewrite history? Since people generally remember nothing, it is only necessary to make statements to be believed. If you make a statement this year that flatly contradicts a statement you made last year, no one will notice.

Thus, it is quite possible for again to visit a cemetary in which Nazi S.S. soldiers are buried and to place his hand on his heart and announce that the S.S. murderers were as much victims of the war as anyone else.

Did he have to go to the trouble of rewriting history? Of course not. He need only forget history, in the comforting knowledge that so do people generally.

There is a very impressive monument in Washington to the dead of the Vietnam War. Every person killed is listed by name in alphabetical order. When it was put up, I was astonished. I thought: "Is the government actually going to list all the Americans needlessly slaughtered in a lost war that was totally unnecessary and foolish? Won't this arouse and sharpen indignation against the leaders who, out of a stubborn fear of being blamed for defeat, insisted on throwing away American lives until defeat became catastrophe?"

It didn't. It is an entirely successful monument, because, after all, fifteen years have passed, and who remembers the Vietnam war? The list of names is simply a list of American soldiers who died in the line of duty, and that naturally moves us. The list exists in a vacuum of forgetfulness. Questions of where, how, and why they died do not arise.

Science fiction writers, then, who are professionally required to probe into the possibilities of change in the future, must take this easy tendency to forget the past into account. Any portrayal of the future in which people are constantly aware of the past in too-great detail is simply foolish.

But still, would people forget *Earth*? Yes, if enough time has passed, and if circumstances warranted. I allowed twenty thousand years to pass and I produced a number of circumstances to encourage forgetting and I think I made it all entirely plausible.

Sometimes I make mistakes, too. In *Robots and Empire*, the exigencies of the plot forced me to drag in Three-Mile Island. Now it sounds ludicrous. Why not Chernobyl? ●

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LETTERS

To: The editors, *IAsfm*
Dear folks,

Norman Spinrad is the most forthright defender of science fiction as a genre that we have, and I admire his efforts in the September issue to encourage more rigorous criticism within the field.

In the process, however, Mr. Spinrad has wandered up a blind alley in his criticism of Ursula K. Le Guin's recent writing. He claims that she has been co-opted by the mainstream literary establishment, abandoning the virtues of her earlier SF in favor of writing imperfect work tailored to the specs of her new out-of-genre "less-than-expert intellectual admirers."

As an explanation of Le Guin's motivations as a writer, this is seriously flawed. In her essay "A Citizen of Mondath" (published in 1973, before this co-opting supposedly took place), Le Guin explained that she only became a science fiction writer in the first place out of a realization that, as a beginning writer, she could not get published unless she fit a category, and science fiction was the nearest and most congenial one. What she had been writing earlier, but could not get published until her fame was sufficient to sell anything with her name on it, was *Orsinian Tales*—precisely the book whose publication Spinrad claims to have been the first sign of Le Guin's co-opting. He has it backwards. Out-of-genre praise of Le Guin's SF did not change her writing, but freed her to publish what she had been writing all along (and to write more in the same vein).

Spinrad might (but does not, directly) argue that Le Guin owes the SF field something for having been the means of her rise in popularity, and this would be understandable, though unfair to an author's freedom to write what she wants. He does argue that the Orsinian books and *Always Coming Home* are inferior to Le Guin's SF. As a critic's subjective judgment, that's inarguable, though I politely disagree. However, the respect which Spinrad's opinion deserves is undermined by a number of potshots he takes at *Always Coming Home*, little statements which are simply untrue. For one, the Kesh do not, as Spinrad states, live a "bucolic good life"; they are poor, suffer from genetic disease, and frequently fail to maintain the "virtuous yin" which is supposedly a consistency of Le Guin's favored characters. For another, the central story of the book is not a twenty thousand word novella, but a fully forty-five thousand word novel. Nor is the rest of the book comparable to *The Dune Encyclopedia*: there are short stories (one

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of which made Gardner Dozois' Best SF of the Year anthology after its magazine publication), poems, and drama as well as expository text, and little of the exposition is as dry as an encyclopedia.

In sum, Spinrad's remarks on Le Guin are an unfortunate digression on the way to valid points that could better have been made without wandering into this byway.

Yours,

David Bratman
Los Altos, CA

I don't wish to comment on Le Guin directly. I'll leave that to Bratman and Spinrad. However, it is true that a number of writers, having achieved fame in science fiction, then move out of the field. That is their right and I have done so myself to some extent. However, I can think of one or two writers who having moved out a) pretend they were never in it, or b) vilify science fiction in one way or another. That is wrong.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

On the slim chance that no one else pointed this out from Stephen King's new novel *IT*:

> "... There would be time to eat as many Twinkies and Ring-Dings and Devil Dogs as he could get his hands on, and time to sit on the back porch reading *Lucky Starr and the Moons of Mercury* ..." (p. 878)

Moons of Mercury? Ouch!

Yours,

Leo Doroschenko
West Orange, NJ

He meant "Moons of Jupiter," of course, but I can't really complain. Let him who has never committed a typo cast the first stone and that surely lets me out.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

With my busy life I had nearly let my subscription to *IAsfm* lapse last month until I read the novelette "The Glass Flower" by George R.R. Martin. This jewel of a story was so well crafted and skillfully rendered that I have signed up for another year of your magazine. A simple congratulations to this author and his editors.

Sincerely,

George E. Davis, Jr.
Augusta, ME

There are some who cancel a subscription because there is one story (one!) which they didn't *like. I must say I approve your attitude and find it a more hopeful and optimistic one.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

This is the first time I have had the pleasure of writing a letter to such a ... "person of note, sane and rational, fearless, and intrepid, witty and forceful, and, above all, devilishly handsome."

I began reading science fiction at the tender age of thirteen, about a quarter of a century ago. My father brought home a copy of *If* for me because, inveterate reader that he was, he wanted to read it, too. I was hooked from the first page. I grew up in the years of *Galaxy* and the

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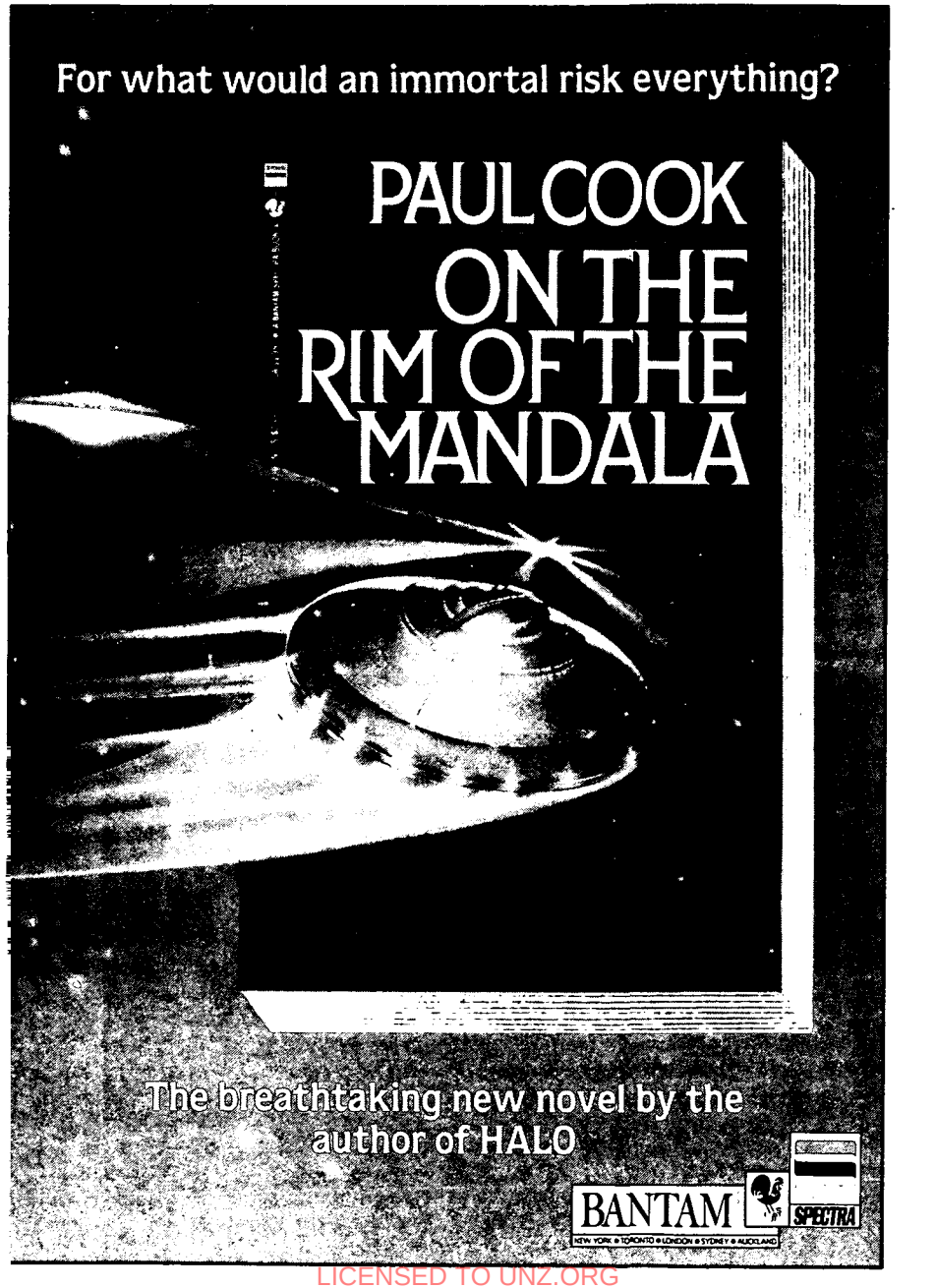
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other magazines of that time. I remained a fan of the genre up through my college days, but then something happened. The science fiction that I knew and loved began to change into the literature of doom and despair. I decided that, for a while at least, I would read something else.

Science fiction, if it is readable at all, to my mind must not only be imaginative and speculative but also must be alive with characters that function as "human" in an alternative but believable milieu, one that may or may not be technologically oriented. This was lacking for quite a number of years. Consequently, I was quite happily surprised by my wife, Mary, when she brought home recently a copy of your magazine. Your magazine comes as close to my fond memories of the "old" science fiction as anything that I have seen in years. I have not lost the old addiction at all; it has just been dormant for too long.

I have enjoyed your work for years, Dr. Asimov, and I am happy that you have put your name and talents to a high quality and very readable product.

Sincerly yours,

Allan Salvador
Cincinnati, OH

One tends to remember the youthful past with a kind of rosy glow. I remember the late 1940s when almost every story was a kind of "atomic doom" piece. Stories in which Earth was conquered by aliens, or buried under a sudden ice-age, or hit by drastic epidemics were common even earlier. In fact, at all times there are both pessimistic and optimistic stories and both have their value.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,
Mr. Dozois, et. al.:

I seldom write letters to the editor, mostly because they seldom seem to get into print (no this was not meant as a veiled hint, despite appearances to the contrary!). But as a long-time subscriber and buyer from Issue No. 1, I have borne the many changes and transmutations of *IAsfm*, mostly not minding them, and sometimes even agreeing with them. I find one of the latest (it first appeared in the October, 1986 issue) irritating enough, however, to write to you about it.

I enjoy Baird Searles' book reviews; in fact, I find that most of the time if he gives a good review to a book, it will probably be one I'll enjoy. But the latest little addition to his column is a) irritating and b) totally unnecessary. I am referring to the "cutesy" little review titles. I do not know whose idea this is, but please, please delete them! They distract from the title of the work (which is, after all, more important to a book review than any cute "review title"), especially since they are printed in a larger typeface than the book's title, and they are also borderline insulting— especially when the review is a favorable one. Why try to be cute or silly or clever when the reviews speak for themselves and really don't need such embellishments?

I found particularly irritating two of the review titles in the November issue: "Quintana Who?"

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and "Alexander's Crosstime Band." Neither book (Tiptree's *Tales of the Quintana Roo* and Scott's *A Choice of Destinies*) deserved such rather trite, cute names.

Enough of that. I have one other minor complaint. That is that I think the SF Conventional Calendar is slipping. I do subscribe, so I receive my copy by mail, usually by the second week of the month preceding the cover date. However, most of the convention listings cover conventions one and two months *preceding* the cover date as well, and are therefore often useless by the time the magazine arrives. For example, the November issue arrived, if I remember correctly, around the middle of September (ok, so they arrive a few weeks earlier than I first stated—), but many of the conventions listed had already taken place or were taking place the next weekend or two. As anyone knows, the earlier you join, the better. And some of us are artists who like to mail art to convention art shows—earlier the better in our case is particularly important, due to art show space and the time it takes to ship art, etc. (Many conventions have a mail-in art deadline that comes way before—two weeks to a month—the actual convention date.) Could the calendar be pushed ahead, so that the listings *start* with the cover date month and reach ahead from there by a month or two? Otherwise you've got a page of wasted space.

Other than that, let me say that I enjoy the magazine immensely; I like the great variety of material which is published. And I don't mind at all the occasional item that some people seem to deride because it's "fantasy." I'm one of those people I sometimes think may be odd even in fandom—I read almost the whole range from "high-tech" SF to epic fantasy. (I enjoyed, as an example of what some folk might deem fantasy that doesn't belong in your magazine, Gregory Frost's "The Hound of Mac Datho." But then, I am a long time fan of Celtic material.)

Thanks for a lot of enjoyable and often thoughtful reading.

Amy Falkowitz
San Jose, CA

(P.S. Need I say I enjoy the LETTERS column?)

I'm not responsible for the "cutesy" titles of the book reviews, but I must admit I'm not offended by them. In fact, when I can think of a cutesy title for one of my essays, I'm only too delighted to do so. Thus, I had essays entitled "Trojean Hearse," "Pompey and Circumstance" and so on. I think there are, in life, many things far worse than "cutesy" titles, so do try to be more tolerant. With time, they may stop—or you may get used to them.
—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

It seems funny writing to a science fiction magazine, but I don't know where else to turn. Perhaps with your broad and extensive knowledge about almost everything, you can make some sense of a puzzle we have here at work.

As you know, the three degree blackbody cosmic background radiation is a standing wave having to do with the Big Bang, but parts

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of it are maybe being used for something else. We've got hold of some very recent Bell Labs monitoring data, and thought that just for fun we'd run the sidebands through Stanford University's new "Semantic-Linguistic Cryptanalysis" (SLICK) programs. Amazingly, here's part of what came out:

$... IT'S THOSE WORLDS THAT REVOLVE ON THEIR AXES THAT YOU HAVE TO WATCH. A UNIFORM HEAT DIFFERENTIAL EXISTS BETWEEN ENERGY RECEIVED FROM THE PLANET'S PRIMARY AND THE ENERGY RADIATED INTO SPACE AS THE PLANET TURNS.

UNDER THESE CONDITIONS, SELF REPLICATING MOLECULAR ACTIVITY CAN GET GOING ON THE PLANET'S SURFACE. SOMETIMES IT EVEN ACQUIRES THE ABILITY TO LAUNCH ITSELF INTO SPACE. UNLESS STOPPED, IT CAN INFECT AN ENTIRE GALAXY IN A FRACTION OF A GALACTIC REVOLUTION.

RIGHT AWAY YOU CAN SEE CHANGES IN A DISEASED GALAXY. IT ACQUIRES A PINK TINGE AS THE VIRUS ENCLOSES STARS IN THIN SHELLS. FINALLY THE WHOLE GALAXY TURNS DEEP RED AS THE PESTILENCE SOAKS UP EVERY BIT OF ENERGY FOR ITS OWN USE.

AS YOU'VE PROBABLY HEARD, IT IS A TEDIOUS JOB TO GO AROUND TO EVERY STAR IN A GALAXY AND STERILIZE IT. ESPECIALLY IF IT'S THAT NASTY CARBON BASED ACTIVITY. SOMETIMES YOU'D BE AMAZED WITH WHAT TENACITY IT TRIES TO HANG ON.

THAT'S WHY YOU SHOULD TRY TO SPOT ANY INFECTION BEFORE IT GETS OFF ITS HOME WORLD.

FORTUNATELY, FOR SOME REASON, JUST BEFORE IT JUMPS OFF INTO SPACE, IT EMITS THE STRANGEST LONG WAVE RADIATION. FOR EXAMPLE, NOT LONG AGO WE PICKED UP THIS ODD ITEM:

"HEY, ROCHESTER,
COME IN HERE!"

OBVIOUSLY, SELF REPLICATING MOLECULES ARE SOMEWHERE IN THE VICINITY AND NEED TO BE ERADICATED.

OTHER THAN THAT, EVERYTHING HAS BEEN QUIET AROUND HERE. HOW ABOUT YOU? .....
GALAXY 8462-6433 E.O.T.

Well, Dr. Asimov, I have no idea what any of that means. Sounds like it's about some kind of outer space bacteria. Do you think it might be dangerous to us, too? Should someone be notified? Thanks a lot.

Sincerely,

Lee Corbin
Tymshare Inc.
Cupertino, CA.

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A peddler of dreams and a phantom rock musician cross the boundaries between life and death—and eternity.

FERAL CELL

Richard Bowes
author of Warchild

Along the great transept that links the dimensions of Cancer and Capricorn, you can hear the music of the band they call The Feral Cell. As each unearthly note fuses the two spheres of existence, Robert Leal passes silently out of New York in the 1990s and into another place: Capricorn. Flesh in one realm, spirit in the other, he will transcend planes of life and death to fight for an idyllic world threatened by an utter evil. It is a battle that will unlock the very secrets of his soul.

David Brin, author of *The Postman*, on *Warchild*: "Very colorful, action-packed, and imaginative. Reminded me of Zelazny."

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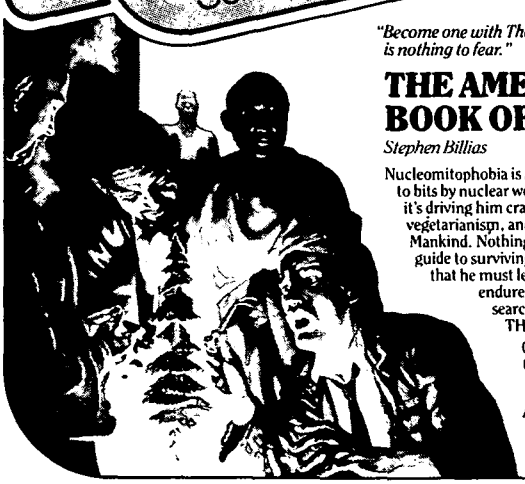

"Become one with The Bomb and there is nothing to fear."

THE AMERICAN BOOK OF THE DEAD

Stephen Billias

Nucleomitophobia is an exaggerated fear of being blown to bits by nuclear weapons. Bertie Rupp has it, and it's driving him crazy. He's tried meditation, yoga, vegetarianism, and the Society for the Preservation of Mankind. Nothing works. Until he hears about a Zen guide to surviving the nuclear holocaust. Convinced that he must learn its secrets if the human race is to endure, Bertie sets out on a desperate search for THE AMERICAN BOOK OF THE DEAD.

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Back in 1935, Edmond Hamilton wrote a story called "The Accursed Galaxy" in which the Universe was horrified to find out that a planet had developed the loathsome disease called life. The entire galaxy containing it was cut off and all the other galaxies fled desperately away from it in all directions. —However, I think the fear is misplaced. It looks as though the disease of life is self-limiting and may destroy itself to the sound of patriotic music.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I read with interest the letter by Eric Schissel in the November issue. The young man is certainly eloquent, and correct as far as he goes, but in one of his statements he touches on a deeper realm where correctness is not so clear. He says "The big bang theory depends only on the known reactions of gases—compression, solidification at high pressures, etc.—which are well understood."

It also depends on the matter being there in the first place, and that is definitely not well understood. I call that a mystery, and I think it is likely to remain one for a very long time. Either matter-energy was there all along or someone put it there. To me, either choice is mind-boggling. Re the former, it's hard to imagine that anything has been here "all along," mainly because I have trouble grasping such infinities. Anyway, why should matter exist rather than not exist?

Re the latter, positing that a First Force created matter just leads to other mysteries. Where does the First Force come from and why should It exist and why should It create matter? Again, these are difficult concepts for most of us.

One can speculate that future science will be very clever and solve these mysteries and who knows what others, too, all without involving God. One can also speculate that future science will lead directly to God. I don't think anyone knows what future science will do, and in any case that doesn't help us here and now.

As you may suspect, I opt for God, mostly because of the Bible. I respect the freedom of others to think otherwise. What do you think?

Dan Shine
Cincinatti, OH

The currently popular version of the Big Bang theory, the so-called inflationary Universe, postulates the origin of matter out of nothing *according to accepted quantum principles. If this holds up, and I find it a very attractive theory, then the Universe is self-created and we need go no further. If people find this incredible, and insist on a divine agency for creation, then that divine agency was self-created. We're going to have self-creation, one way or another, so it might as well be the Universe, which we can, at least, observe and measure.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and Colleagues:

I am writing in general praise of the continued high quality of *IAsfm*, but also because of an issue which touches all who write, edit, read, and enjoy science fiction and fantasy. I refer to the extremist atti-

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tude of members of the fundamentalist radical right toward both science fiction and fantasy. According to a recent article in *Newsweek*, a woman named Vicki Frost and seven other families are suing their local school board in Tennessee because of the textbooks chosen for public school. She disapproves of a textbook series by Holt, Rinehart and Winston because it includes a short story called "A Visit to Mars" which uses the time-honored SF notion of mental telepathy. According to the article, Frost claims telepathy represents a sacrilegious attempt to equal God's abilities. Frost equally decries the evils of fantasy. She disapproves of *The Wizard of Oz* because it includes good witches. I shudder to think what she would make of Connie Willis' delightful story, "Spice Pogrom."

This woman and her supporters for censorship in Tennessee are not a small isolated group of extremists. The fundamentalist right is large and growing, is entering more and more actively into politics, and is able to raise tremendous sums of money for its activities. All the censorship these persons advocate is greatly disturbing, but I am especially horrified and dismayed that they are attacking science fiction and fantasy, the literature that most encourages imagination, freedom of thought, tolerance for infinite choices and possibilities, and thus tolerance for the freedoms Americans enjoy and expect. As a major publisher of science fiction and fantasy, *IAsfm* automatically

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stands out against the intolerance and repressiveness of the radical fundamentalists. However, I do not think that *IAsfm* or the SF community in general should ever be complacent. I encourage *IAsfm* to continue as a bastion against intolerance and a forum for freedom of thought, not only by including a broad range of excellent stories but also by addressing this issue directly in spaces such as the Viewpoint essays and the editorials. Keep up the good work and don't rest on your laurels!

All the best to all of you at *IAsfm*,

Rozalyn Levin
Chicago, IL

You needn't worry. This magazine will remain the bastion it is for freedom of thought and expression. After all, among all the enlightened authors denounced by those troglodytes and trilobites of the fundamentalist right is none other than your very own lovable Isaac Asimov. (I assure you I'd feel hurt if they neglected me.)

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Reading your editorial entitled "The Kiss of Death?" (in the October '86 issue) started me thinking, as is usual when reading anything you have written. A month later, when my copy of *Writer's Market '87* arrived, I decided to go through it and mark all the consumer publications that indicated they were interested in fiction of any kind, and especially mark those mentioning an interest in SF and Mainstream fiction. Since it was only a little more work, I also decided to mark the entries for Mystery and Western fiction, and perform some basic quantitative analysis.

Out of a total of forty-six listed categories, thirty-six of them had at least one publication that listed an interest in some kind of fiction. These thirty-six separate markets contained a total of 387 publications that have an interest in some fiction, ranging from mildly indifferent to desperate.

Out of the 387 publications, eighteen (4.7 percent) specifically prohibited SF. Not one listed just SF as being excluded, rather all had two categories or more they wished to avoid. The most common combination was "No Science Fiction or Fantasy." Also common was SF and Romance or Confession, and Adventure. One listing, for a children's magazine, read "No talking animal stories, science fiction, Halloween stories or first-person stories from an adult's viewpoint." Also some publications, although they did not mention SF, were obviously not interested in it, such as "Lefthander Magazine" and "Fly Fisherman."

Out of the same 387 publications, sixty-six (17.1 percent) specifically encouraged SF. This compares with seventy-three (18.9 percent) for Mystery, twenty-four (6.2 percent) for Western, and 69 (17.8 percent) for Mainstream fiction. One publication listed only SF and Rock & Roll Fiction as desired. Another publication, which was outside of the SF section, "Collage"

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listed only SF as desired. The bad news is that Collage purchases only one manuscript per year.

The categories that had the most requests for SF were Science Fiction, Literary & Little, Juvenile, Lifestyles, and Sports.

In addition there were uncounted numbers of entries that read something like "Quality fiction" or "Plot must develop out of Characters" or "No restrictions on subject matter or theme" which imply acceptance of well written SF.

A less detailed look at book publishers showed that 226 had some interest in some kind of fiction. Out of these fifty-one (22.6 percent) publish SF, fifty-five (24.3 percent) publish Mystery, nineteen (8.4 percent) publish Western and seventy-five (33.2 percent) publish Mainstream fiction.

I think this proves that SF is not in a "ghetto" except in the minds of a few. It has not captured the majority of the market, any more than any other genre has. But it does have a respectable minority.

I think perhaps the reason some SF novels don't carry the Science Fiction label is because of the decisions made by someone in PR: not the editors, who presumably can keep their jobs only if they know what some segment of the population wants to read. It is a sly marketing strategy aimed at tricking those who would flinch at the mention of "Science Fiction" into buying the book anyway. It may be assumed that the SF fans will buy the book (if it is good enough) whether it is labeled or not.

I personally think it is more honest to indicate a book is SF unless the title leaves no doubt, like *The Robots that Loved the Galaxy*. It is comparable to a newspaper editor clearly labeling opinion, so that a reader will not become confused or angry. A reader has the right to avoid any type of written material chosen, whether it is SF or Political Opinion.

At any rate I hope this helps to dispel the idea that SF is a "poor relative" in literature. At least in 1987. Perhaps some other people would like to do the same thing with previous editions of *Writer's Market*, to see if there has been some sort of trend of SF growth in the last ten or twenty years.

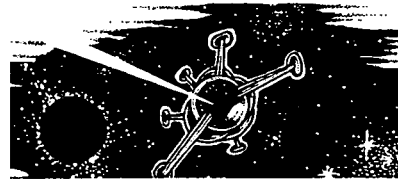
Incidentally, the spring 1986 issue of "Modern Fiction Studies" published by the English department of Purdue University, is about "Science and Fantasy Fiction." I know of no better sign of respectability.

Sincerely,

Douglas R. Pitts
713 Arbor
Vandenberg AFB, CA 93437

Of course, there is such a thing as getting too respectable. I suspect that some SF writers are writing for academic recognition and approval rather than for readers. Some years ago, the cry went out, "Let's put science fiction back in the gutter, where it belongs."

—Isaac Asimov



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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

There haven't been that many really great fantasy board games. The elusive nature of fantasy has proven more difficult to "game-out" than the nuts and bolts hardware bashing of SF. A quick look at some stellar SF titles, like Steve Jackson Games' *Ogre* (futurist combat versus a supertank) and *Car Wars* (the original Dueling Dodges game), and the lack of such "hot" fantasy titles tells the tale.

But there have been exceptions. One fantasy game, *Dragon Pass* (The Avalon Hill Game Company, 4517 Hartford Road, Baltimore, MD 21214; $16.00) is one of the best games I've played, and a remarkable re-creation of a fantasy world. Originally released by Chaosium Inc., *Dragon Pass* is the board game of Greg Stafford's fantasy role-playing world, Glorantha. Using detailed, but not overly complicated rules, the game populates the colorful board with personalities, spells, and armies that transcend the one-quarter inch of cardboard that they're printed on.

Another recent success (and an unexpected one) is Games Workshop's *Talisman* (9110F Red Branch Road, Columbia, MD 21045; $18.00). *Talisman* is very much a board game, with its big spaces, cards, and dice. But it also features characters with many of the features of a role-playing game, such as strength, craft, objects, followers, wives, and that ever-handy commodity, gold. The game was a surprising one, easy to play, lots of fun, and filled with the genuine flavor of fantasy. Games Workshop has released an expansion kit and *Talisman, the Adventure* ($8.00), which features additional characters, record sheets, and five alternate endings to the game.

A recent candidate for this select group is Standard Games and Publications' *Dark Blades* (distributed by The Armory, 4145 Amos Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21215; $24.95). The company has released a number of medieval, oriental, and even western combat games, but *Dark Blades* introduces elements from the realms of fantasy with interesting results.

Physically, the components of the game are top-notch. There's a full-color map of the Isle of Labrynthia detailing locations that could be used for a campaign version of the game. The boards provided are two oversized maps, with inch-wide hexes, one labeled "The Watermill" and the other called "The Arena." Both maps have an

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interesting collection of features, gentle ridges, a meandering stream, trees, ruins, and a grim combat arena.

But it is the characters that deserve the most attention. Each character in this game is a carefully painted image. There are over two hundred double-sized counters supplying you with a host of trolls, ogres, knights, common folk, and beasts of burden. A low-powered dragon is also thrown in, as well as gargoyles and vicious war dogs. Each character piece displays its attack and defense strength, as well as its movement value.

Much of the game is built on Standard Games' earlier issue, *Cry Havoc*. Missile fire from archers is resolved first, with the strength of attack directly related to the target's distance. A simple line of sight rule is used that covers contingencies like shooting into woods or buildings. The characters move, and a simple chart displays the movement course for different terrain. Hand-to-hand combat is resolved by comparing an attacker's strength against the defensive strength of the opponent.

Dark Blades adds a simple magic system to the game. Certain characters are permitted to carry spell cards. These cards, with spells ranging from the benign "Move Freely" to the bluntly-named "Death," can have a surprising effect on the game. Spells can have different areas of effect, with some capable of being cast only in a straight line, while others can affect a larger area around the spell caster.

At the end of the rule book are four scenarios for *Dark Blades*, all serviceable, but none too imaginative. Considering the possibilities inherent in the characters, there could have been some dicey situations developed. But there's certainly nothing to hold you back from creating your own scenarios.

One annoying aspect of the game happens to be its system of record keeping. Each character is represented by two large cardboard counters. If the character is "stunned," then the counter is flipped over. If the character is wounded, the bottom counter is brought to the top. If killed, the bottom character is flipped over and the carcass is left there to litter the battlefield. Keeping track of the matched pairs of counters can get a bit cumbersome.

Also, it can get a bit confusing trying to tell good guys from bad. Lacking a distinguishing color code, when bunches of trolls and knights get together it can be difficult to sort out who belongs to whom. I suggest that players have the counters reversed from each other.

Dark Blades is, in essence, a miniatures game. There will, in fact, be metal miniatures released for players to use. And while it lacks some of the detailed rules (such as facing) that many miniatures gamers favor, it is nonetheless a colorful, exciting game to play. ●

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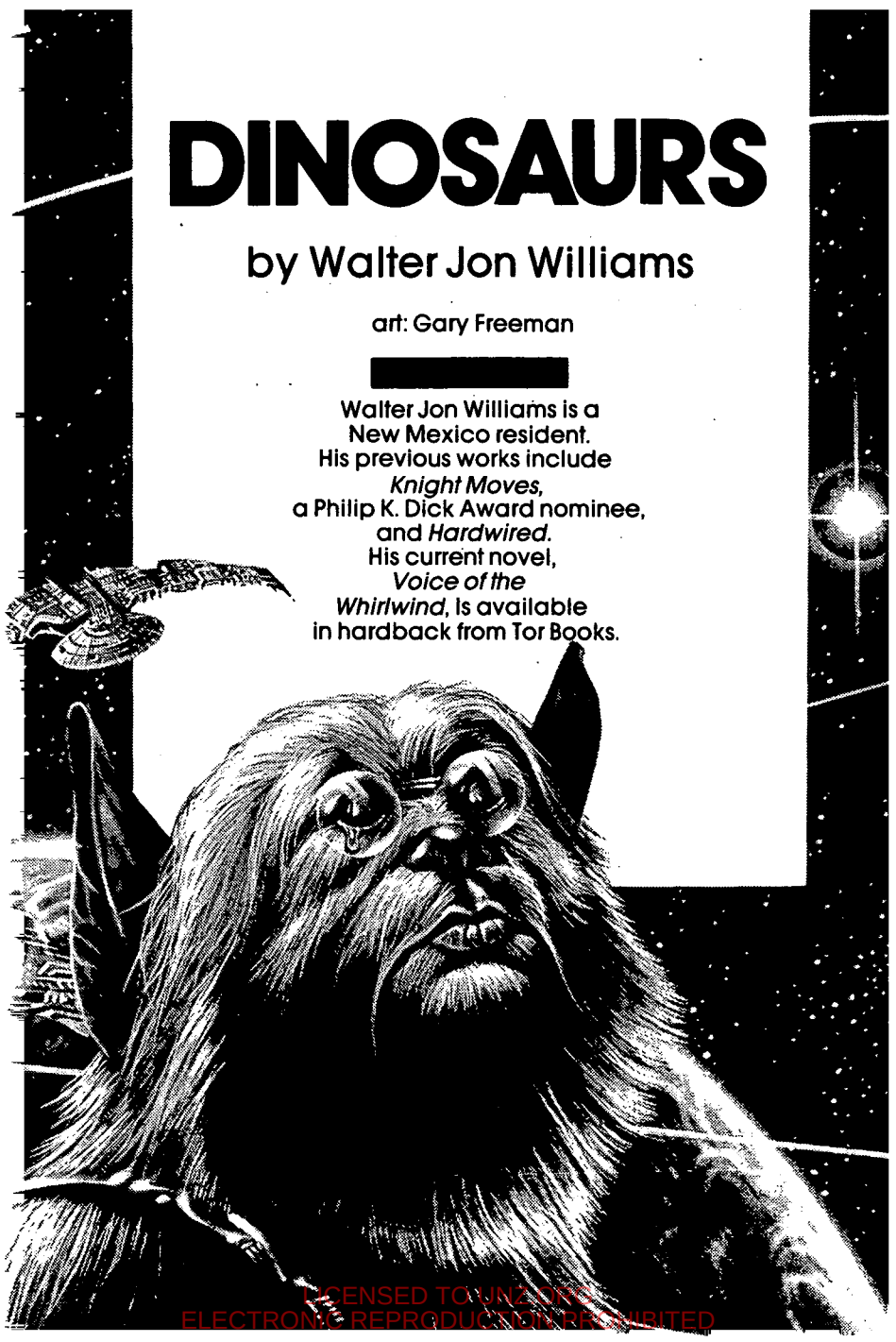
DINOSAURS

by Walter Jon Williams

art: Gary Freeman

[redacted]

Walter Jon Williams is a New Mexico resident. His previous works include *Knight Moves*, a Philip K. Dick Award nominee, and *Hardwired*. His current novel, *Voice of the Whirlwind*, is available in hardback from Tor Books.



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The Shars seethed in the dim light of their ruddy sun. Pointed faces raised to the sky, they sniffed the faint wind for sign of the stranger and scented only hydrocarbons, far-off vegetation, damp fur, the sweat of excitement and fear. Weak eyes peered upward, glistened with hope, anxiety, apprehension, and saw only the faint pattern of stars. Short, excited barking sounds broke out here and there, but mostly the Shars crooned, a low ululation that told of sudden onslaught, destruction, war in distant reaches, and now the hope of peace.

The crowds surged left, then right. Individuals bounced high on their third legs, seeking a view, seeing only the wide sea of heads, the ears and muzzles pointed to the stars.

Suddenly, a screaming. High-pitched howls, a bright chorus of barks. The crowds surged again.

Something was crossing the field of stars.

The human ship was huge, vaster than anything they'd seen, a moonlet descending. Shars closed their eyes and shuddered in terror. The screaming turned to moans. Individuals leaped high, baring their teeth, barking in defiance of their fear. The air smelled of terror, incipient panic, anger.

War! cried some. *Peace!* cried others.

The crooning went on. *We mourn, we mourn,* it said, *we mourn our dead billions.*

We fear, said others.

Soundlessly, the human ship neared them, casting its vast shadow. Shars spilled outward from the spot beneath, bounding high on their third legs.

The human ship came to a silent rest. Dully, it reflected the dim red sun.

The Shars crooned their fear, their sorrow. And waited for the humans to emerge.

These? Yes. These. Drill, the human ambassador, gazed through his video walls at the sea of Shars, the moaning, leaping thousands that surrounded him. Through the mass a group was moving with purpose, heading for the airlock as per his instructions. His new Memory crawled restlessly in the armored hollow atop his skull. *Stand by,* he broadcast.

His knees made painful crackling noises as he walked toward the airlock, the silver ball of his translator rolling along the ceiling ahead of him. The walls mutated as he passed, showing him violet sky, far-off polygonal buildings, cold distant green . . . and here, nearby, a vast, dim plain covered with a golden tissue of Shars.

He reached the airlock and it began to open. Drill snuffed wetly at the alien smells—heat, dust, the musky scent of the Shars themselves.

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Drill's heart thumped in his chest. His dreams were coming true. He had waited all his life for this.

Mash, whimpered Lowbrain. Drill told it to be silent. Lowbrain protested vaguely, then obeyed.

Drill told Lowbrain to move. Cool, alien air brushed his skin. The Shars cried out sharply, moaned, fell back. They seemed a wild, sibilant ocean of pointed ears and dark, questing eyes. The group heading for the airlock vanished in the general retrograde movement, a stone washed by a pale tide. Beneath Drill's feet was soft vegetation. His translator floated in the air before him. His mind flamed with wonder, but Lowbrain kept him moving.

The Shars fell back, moaning.

Drill stood eighteen feet tall on his two pillarlike legs, each with a splayed foot that displayed a horny underside and vestigial nails. His skin was ebony and was draped in folds over his vast naked body. His pendulous maleness swung loosely as he walked. As he stepped across the open space he was conscious of the fact that he was the ultimate product of nine million years of human evolution, all leading to the expansion, diversification, and perfection that was now humanity's manifest existence.

He looked down at the little Shars, their white skin and golden fur, their strange, stiff tripod legs, the muzzles raised to him as if in awe. *If your species survives,* he thought benignly, *you can look like me in another few million years.*

The group of Shars that had been forging through the crowd were suddenly exposed when the crowd fell back from around them. On the perimeter were several Shars holding staffs—weapons, perhaps—in their clever little hands. In the center of these were a group of Shars wearing decorative ribbon to which metal plates had been attached. *Badges of rank,* Memory said. *Ignore.* The shadow of the translator bobbed toward them as Drill approached. Metallic geometries rose from the group and hovered over them.

Recorders, Memory said. *Artificial similarities to myself. Or possibly security devices. Disregard.*

Drill was getting closer to the party, speeding up his instructions to Lowbrain, eventually entering Zen Synch. It would make Lowbrain hungrier but lessen the chance of any accidents.

The Shars carrying the staffs fell back. A wailing went up from the crowd as one of the Shars stepped toward Drill. The ribbons draped over her sloping shoulders failed to disguise four mammalian breasts. Clear plastic bubbles covered her weak eyes. In Zen Synch with Memory and

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Lowbrain, Drill ambled up to her and raised his hands in friendly greeting. The Shar flinched at the expanse of the gesture.

"I am Ambassador Drill," he said. "I am a human."

The Shar gazed up at him. Her nose wrinkled as she listened to the booming voice of the translator. Her answer was a succession of sharp sounds, made high in the throat, somewhat unpleasant. Drill listened to the voice of his translator.

"I am President Gram of the InterSharian Sociability of Nations and Planets." That's how it came through in translation, anyway. Memory began feeding Drill referents for the word "nation."

"I welcome you to our planet, Ambassador Drill."

"Thank you, President Gram," Drill said. "Shall we negotiate peace now?"

President Gram's ears pricked forward, then back. There was a pause, and then from the vast circle of Shars came a mad torrent of hooting noises. The awesome sound lapped over Drill like the waves of a lunatic sea.

They approve your sentiment, said Memory.

I thought that's what it meant, Drill said. *Do you think we'll get along?*

Memory didn't answer, but instead shifted to a more comfortable position in the saddle of Drill's skull. Its job was to provide facts, not draw conclusions.

"If you could come into my Ship," Drill said, "we could get started."

"Will we then meet the other members of your delegation?"

Drill gazed down at the Shar. The fur on her shoulders was rising in odd tufts. She seemed to be making a concerted effort to calm it.

"There are no other members," Drill said. "Just myself."

His knees were paining him. He watched as the other members of the Shar party cast quick glances at each other.

"No secretaries? No assistants?" the President was saying.

"No," Drill said. "Not at all. I'm the only conscious mind on Ship. Shall we get started?"

Eat! Eat! said Lowbrain. Drill ordered it to be silent. His stomach grumbled.

"Perhaps," said President Gram, gazing at the vastness of the human ship, "it would be best should we begin in a few hours. I should probably speak to the crowd. Would you care to listen?"

No need. Memory said. *I will monitor.*

"Thank you, no," Drill said. "I shall return to Ship for food and sex. Please signal me when you are ready. Please bring any furniture you may need for your comfort. I do not believe my furniture would fit you, although we might be able to clone some later."

The Shars' ears all pricked forward. Drill entered Zen Synch, turned

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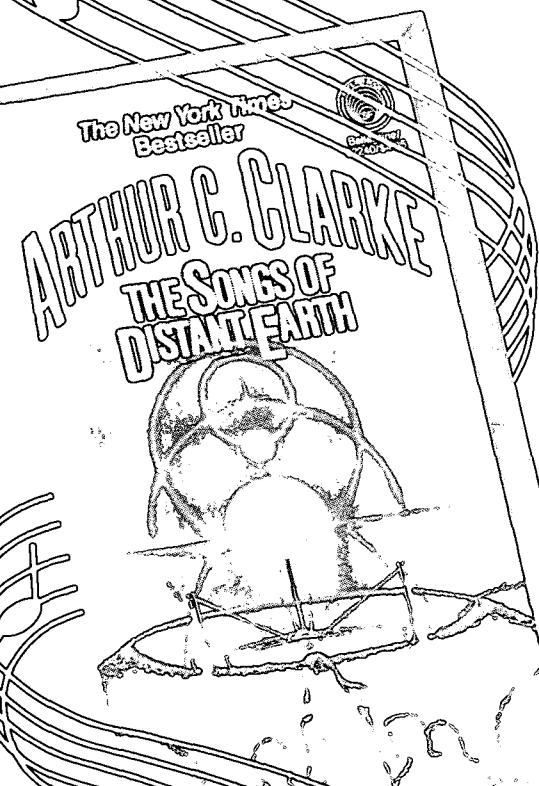

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his huge body, and began accelerating toward the airlock. The sound of the crowd behind him was like the murmuring of wind through a stand of trees.

Peace, he thought later, as he stood by the mash bins and fed his complaining stomach. *It's a simple thing. How long can it take to arrange?*

Long, said Memory. *Very long.*

The thought disturbed him. He thought the first meeting had gone well.

After his meal, when he had sex, it wasn't very good.

Memory had been monitoring the events outside Ship, and after Drill had completed sex, Memory showed him the outside events. *They have been broadcast to the entire population,* Memory said.

President Gram had moved to a local elevation and had spoken for some time. Drill found her speech interesting—it was rhythmic and incantorial, rising and falling in tone and volume, depending heavily on repetition and melody. The crowd participated, issuing forth with excited barks or low moans in response to her statements or questions, sometimes babbling in confusion when she posed them a conundrum. Memory only gave the highlights of the speech. "Unknown . . . attackers . . . billions dead . . . preparations advanced . . . ready to defend ourselves . . . offer of peace . . . hope in the darkness . . . unknown . . . willing to take the chance . . . peace . . . peace . . . hopeful smell . . . peace." At the end the other Shars were all singing "Peace! Peace!" in chorus while President Gram bounced up and down on her sturdy rear leg.

It sounds pretty, Drill thought. *But why does she go on like that?*

Memory's reply was swift.

Remember that the Shars are a generalized and social species, it said. *President Gram's power, and her ability to negotiate, derives from the degree of her popular support. In measures of this significance she must explain herself and her actions to the population in order to maintain their enthusiasm for her policies.*

Primitive, Drill thought.

That is correct.

Why don't they let her get on with her work? Drill asked.

There was no reply.

After an exchange of signals the Shar party assembled at the airlock. Several Shars had been mobilized to carry tables and stools. Drill sent a Frog to escort the Shars from the airlock to where he waited. The Frog met them inside the airlock, turned, and hopped on ahead through Ship's airy, winding corridors. It had been trained to repeat "Follow me, follow me" in the Shars' own language.

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Drill waited in a semi-reclined position on a Slab. The Slab was an organic sub-species used as furniture, with an idiot brain capable of responding to human commands. The Shars entered cautiously, their weak eyes twitching in the bright light. "Welcome, Honorable President," Drill said. "Up, Slab." Slab began to adjust itself to place Drill on his feet. The Shars were moving tables and stools into the vast room.

Frog was hopping in circles, making a wet noise at each landing. "Follow me, follow me," it said.

The members of the Shar delegation who bore badges of rank stood in a body while the furniture-carriers bustled around them. Drill noticed, as Slab put him on his feet, that they were wrinkling their noses. He wondered what it meant.

His knees crackled as he came fully upright. "Please make yourselves comfortable," he said. "Frog will show your laborers to the airlock."

"Does your Excellency object to a mechanical recording of the proceedings?" President Gram asked. She was shading her eyes with her hand.

"Not at all." As a number of devices rose into the air above the party, Drill wondered if it were possible to give the Shars detachable Memories. Perhaps human bioengineers could adapt the Memories to the Shar physiology. He asked Memory to make a note of the question so that he could bring it up later.

"Follow me, follow me," Frog said. The workers who had carried the furniture began to follow the hopping Frog out of the room.

"Your Excellency," President Gram said, "may I have the honor of presenting to you the other members of my delegation?"

There were six in all, with titles like Secretary for Syncopated Speech and Special Executive for External Coherence. There was also a Minister for the Dissemination of Convincing Lies, whose title Drill suspected was somehow mistranslated, and an Opposite Secretary-General for the Genocidal Eradication of Alien Aggressors, at whom Drill looked with more than a little interest. The Opposite Secretary-General was named Vang, and was small even for a Shar. He seemed to wrinkle his nose more than the others. The Special Executive for External Coherence, whose name was Cup, seemed a bit piebald, patches of white skin showing through the golden fur covering his shoulders, arms, and head.

He is elderly, said Memory.

That's what I thought.

"Down, Slab," Drill said. He leaned back against the creature and began to move to a more relaxed position.

He looked at the Shars and smiled. Fur ruffled on shoulders and necks. "Shall we make peace now?" he asked.

"We would like to clarify something you said earlier," President Gram

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said. "You said that you were the only, ah, conscious entity on the ship. That you were the only member of the human delegation. Was that translated correctly?"

"Why, yes," Drill said. "Why would more than one diplomat be necessary?"

The Shars looked at each other. The Special Executive for External Coherence spoke cautiously.

"You will not be needing to consult with your superiors? You have full authority from your government?"

Drill beamed at them. "We humans do not have a government, of course," he said. "But I am a diplomat with the appropriate Memory and training. There is no problem that I can foresee."

"Please let me understand, your Excellency," Cup said. He was leaning forward, his small eyes watering. "I am elderly and may be slow in comprehending the situation. But if you have no government, who accredited you with this mission?"

"I am a diplomat. It is my specialty. No accreditation is necessary. The human race will accept my judgment on any matter of negotiation, as they would accept the judgment of any specialist in his area of expertise."

"But why *you*. As an individual?"

Drill shrugged massively. "I was part of the nearest diplomatic enclave, and the individual without any other tasks at the moment." He looked at each of the delegation in turn. "I am incredibly happy to have this chance, honorable delegates," he said. "The vast majority of human diplomats never have the chance to speak to another species. Usually we mediate only in conflicts of interest between the various groups of human specialties."

"But the human species will abide by your decisions?"

"Of course." Drill was surprised at the Shar's persistence. "Why wouldn't they?"

Cup settled back in his chair. His ears were down. There was a short silence.

"We have an opening statement prepared," President Gram said. "I would like to enter it into our record, if I may. Or would your Excellency prefer to go first?"

"I have no opening statement," Drill said. "Please go ahead."

Cup and the President exchanged glances. President Gram took a deep breath and began.

Long. Memory said. *Very long*.

The opening statement seemed very much like the address President Gram had been delivering to the crowd, the same hypnotic rhythms, more or less the same content. The rest of the delegation made muted responses. Drill drowsed through it, enjoying it as music.

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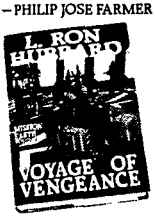

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"Thank you, Honorable President," he said afterwards. "That was very nice."

"We would like to propose an agenda for the conference," Gram said. "First, to resolve the matter of the cease-fire and its provisions for an ending to hostilities. Second, the establishment of a secure border between our two species, guaranteeing both species room for expansion. Third, the establishment of trade and visitation agreements. Fourth, the matter of reparations, payments, and return of lost territory."

Drill nodded. "I believe," he said, "that resolution of the second through fourth points will come about as a result of an understanding reached on the first. That is, once the cease-fire is settled, that resolution will imply a settlement of the rest of the situation."

"You accept the agenda?"

"If you like. It doesn't matter."

Ears pricked forward, then back. "So you accept that our initial discussions will consist of formalizing the disengagement of our forces?"

"Certainly. Of course I have no way of knowing what forces you have committed. We humans have committed none."

The Shars were still for a long time. "Your species attacked our planets, Ambassador. Without warning, without making yourselves known to us." Gram's tone was unusually flat. Perhaps, Drill thought, she was attempting to conceal great emotion.

"Yes," Drill said. "But those were not our military formations. Your species were contacted only by our terraforming Ships. They did not attack your people, as such—they were only peripherally aware of your existence. Their function was merely to seed the planets with lifeforms favorable to human existence. Unfortunately for your people, part of the function of these lifeforms is to destroy the native life of the planet."

The Shars conferred with one another. The Opposite Secretary-General seemed particularly vehement. Then President Gram turned to Drill.

"We cannot accept your statement, your Excellency," she said. "Our people were attacked. They defended themselves, but were overcome."

"Our terraforming Ships are very good at what they do," Drill said. "They are specialists. Our Shrikes, our Shrews, our Sharks—each is a master of its element. But they lack intelligence. They are not conscious entities, such as ourselves. They weren't aware of your civilization at all. They only saw you as food."

"You're claiming that you *didn't notice us?"* demanded Secretary-General Vang. "*They didn't notice us as they were killing us?*" He was shouting. President Gram's ears went back.

"Not as such, no," Drill said.

President Gram stood up. "I am afraid, your Excellency, your explanations are insufficient," she said. "This conference must be postponed

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until we can reach a united conclusion concerning your remarkable attitude."

Drill was bewildered. "What did I say?" he asked.

The other Shars stood. President Gram turned and walked briskly on her three legs toward the exit. The others followed.

"Wait," Drill said. "Don't go. Let me send for Frog. Up, Slab, up!"

The Shars were gone by the time Slab had got Drill to his feet. The Ship told him they had found their own way to the airlock. Drill could think of nothing to do but order the airlock to let them out.

"Why would I lie?" he asked. "Why would I lie to them?" Things were so very simple, really.

He shifted his vast weight from one foot to the other and back again. Drill could not decide whether he had done anything wrong. He asked Memory what to do next, but Memory held no information to comfort him, only dry recitations of past negotiations. Annoyed at the lifeless monologue, Drill told Memory to be silent and began to walk restlessly through the corridors of his Ship. He could not decide where things had gone bad.

Sensing his agitation, Lowbrain began to echo his distress. *Mash,* Lowbrain thought weakly. *Food. Sex.*

Be silent, Drill commanded.

Sex, sex, Lowbrain thought.

Drill realized that Lowbrain was beginning to give him an erection. Acceding to the inevitable, he began moving toward Surrogate's quarters.

Surrogate lived in a dim, quiet room filled with the murmuring sound of its own heartbeat. It was a human subspecies, about the intelligence of Lowbrain, designed to comfort voyagers on long journeys through space, when carnal access to their own subspecies might necessarily be limited. Surrogate had a variety of sexual equipment designed for the accommodation of the various human subspecies and their sexes. It also had large mammaries that gave nutritious milk, and a rudimentary head capable of voicing simple thoughts.

Tiny Mice, that kept Surrogate and the ship clean, scattered as Drill entered the room. Surrogate's little head turned to him.

"It's good to see you again," Surrogate said.

"I am Drill."

"It's good to see you again, Drill," said Surrogate. "It's good to see you again."

Drill began to nuzzle its breasts. One of Surrogate's male parts began to erect. "I'm confused, Surrogate," he said. "I don't know what to do."

"Why are you confused, Drill?" asked Surrogate. It raised one of its arms and began to stroke Drill's head. It wasn't really having a conver-

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sation: Surrogate had only been programmed to make simple statements, or to analyze its partners' speech and ask questions.

"Things are going wrong," Drill said. He began to suckle. The warm milk flowed down his throat. Surrogate's male part had an orgasm. Mice jumped from hiding to clean up the mess.

"Why are things going wrong?" asked Surrogate. "I'm sure everything will be all right."

Lowbrain had an orgasm, perceived by Drill as scattered, faraway bits of pleasure. Drill continued to suckle, feeling a heavy comfort beginning to radiate from Surrogate, from the gentle sound of its heartbeat, its huge, wholesome, brainless body.

Everything will be all right, Drill decided.

"Nice to see you again, Drill," Surrogate said. "Drill, it's *nice* to see you again."

The vast crowds of Shars did not leave when night fell. Instead they stood beneath floating globes dispersing a cold reddish light that reflected eerily from pointed ears and muzzles. Some of them donned capes or skirts to help them keep warm. Drill, watching them on the video walls of the command center, was reminded of crowds standing in awe before some vast cataclysm.

The Shars were not quiet. They stood in murmuring groups, but sometimes they began the crooning chants they had raised earlier, or suddenly broke out in a series of shrill yipping cries.

President Gram spoke to them after she had left Ship. "The human has admitted his species' attacks," she said, "but has disclaimed responsibility. We shall urge him to adopt a more realistic position."

"Adopt a position," Drill repeated, not understanding. "It is not a position. It is the truth. Why don't they understand?"

Opposite Minister-General Vang was more vehement. "We now have a far more complete idea of the humans' attitude," he said. "It is opposed to ours in every way. We shall not allow the murderous atrocities which the humans have committed upon five of our planets to be forgotten, or understood to be the result of some inexplicable lack of attention on the part of our species' enemies."

"That one is obviously deranged," thought Drill.

He went to his sleeping quarters and ordered the Slab there to play him some relaxing music. Even with Slab's murmurs and comforting hums, it took Drill some time before his agitation subsided.

Diplomacy, he thought as slumber overtook him, was certainly a strange business.

In the morning the Shars were still there, chanting and crying, moving

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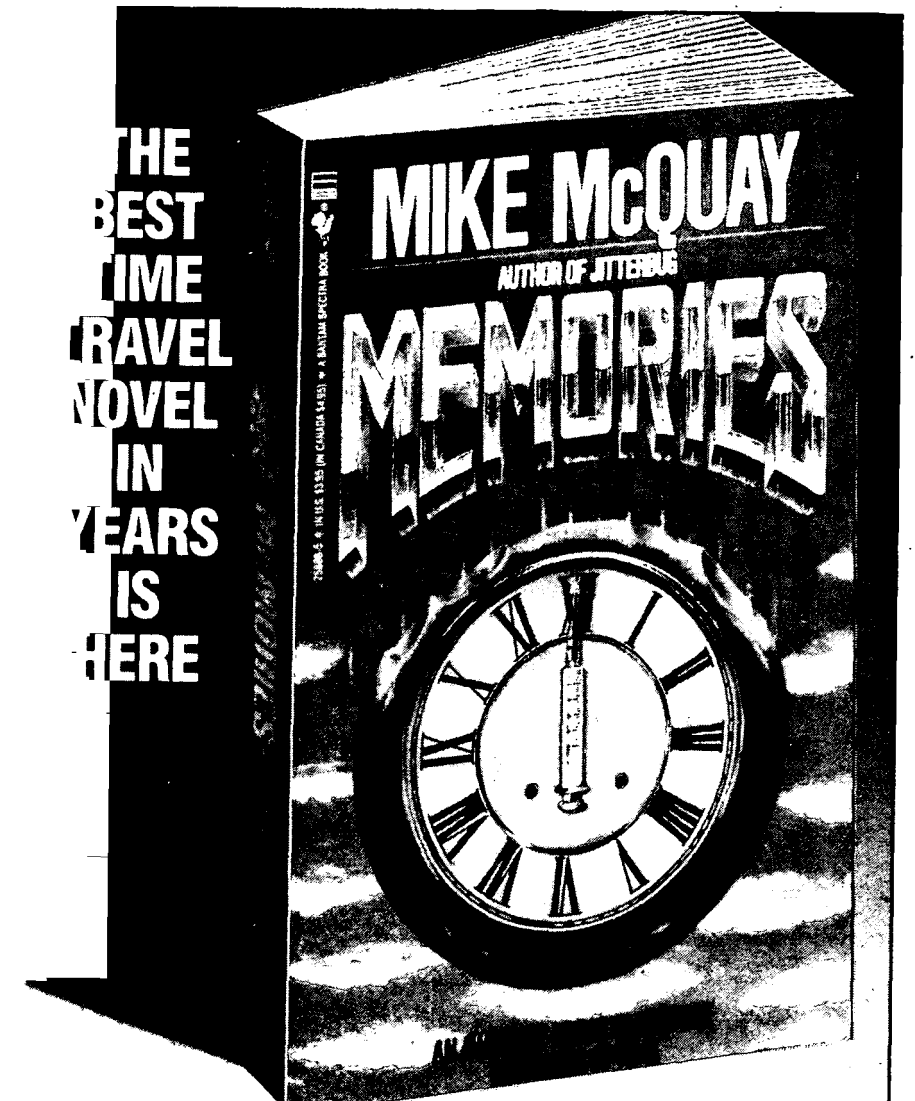

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in their strange crowded patterns. Drill watched them on his video walls as he ate breakfast at the mash bins. "There is a communication from President Gram," Memory announced. "She wishes to speak with you by radio."

"Certainly."

"Ambassador Drill." She was using the flat tones again. A pity she was subject to such stress.

"Good morning, President Gram," Drill said. "I hope you spent a pleasant night."

"I must give you the results of our decision. We regret that we can see no way to continue the negotiations unless you, as a representative of your species, agree to admit responsibility for your peoples' attacks on our planets."

"Admit responsibility?" Drill said. "Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

Drill heard some odd, indistinct barking sounds that his translator declined to interpret for him. It sounded as if someone other than President Gram were on the other end of the radio link.

"You admit responsibility?" President Gram's amazement was clear even in translation.

"Certainly. Does it make a difference?"

President Gram declined to answer that question. Instead she proposed another meeting for that afternoon.

"I will be ready at any time."

Memory recorded President Gram's speech to her people, and Drill studied it before meeting the Shar party at the airlock. She made a great deal out of the fact that Drill had admitted humanity's responsibility for the war. Her people leaped, yipped, chanted their responses as if possessed. Drill wondered why they were so excited.

Drill met the party at the airlock this time, linked with Memory and Lowbrain in Zen Synch so as not to accidentally step on the President or one of her party. He smiled and greeted each by name and led them toward the conference room.

"I believe," said Cup, "we may avoid future misunderstandings, if your Excellency would consent to inform us about your species. We have suffered some confusion in regard to your distinction between 'conscious' and 'unconscious' entities. Could you please explain the difference, as you understand it?"

"A pleasure, your Excellency," Drill said. "Our species, unlike yours, is highly specialized. Once, eight million years ago, we were like you—a small, nonspecialized species type is very useful at a certain stage of evolution. But once a species reaches a certain complexity in its social and technological evolution, the need for specialists becomes too acute. Through both deliberate genetic manipulation and natural evolution,

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humanity turned away from a generalist species, toward highly specialized forms adapted to particular functions and environments. We understand this to be a natural function of species evolution.

"In the course of our explorations into manipulating our species, we discovered that the most efficient way of coding large amounts of information was in our own cell structure—our DNA. For tasks requiring both large and small amounts of data, we arranged that, as much as possible, these would be performed by organic entities, human subspecies. Since many of these tasks were boring and repetitive, we reasoned that advanced consciousness, such as that which we both share, was not necessary. You have met several unconscious entities. Frog, for example, and the Slab on which I lie. Many parts of my Ship are also alive, though not conscious."

"That would explain the smell," one of the delegation murmured.

"The terraforming Ships," Drill went on, "which attacked your planets —these were also designed so as not to require a conscious operator."

The Shars squinted up at Drill with their little eyes. "But why?" Cup asked.

"Terraforming is a dull process. It takes many years. No conscious mind could possibly enjoy it."

"But your species would find itself at war without knowing it. If your explanation for the cause of this war is correct, you already have."

Drill shrugged massively. "This happens from time to time. Sometimes other species which have reached our stage of development have attacked us in the same way. When it does, we arrange a peace."

"You consider these attacks normal?" Opposite Minister-General Vang was the one who spoke.

"These occasional encounters seem to be a natural result of species evolution," Drill said.

Vang turned to one of the Shars near him and spoke in several sharp barks. Drill heard a few words: "Billions lost . . . five planets . . . atrocities . . . *natural result!*"

"I believe," said President Gram, "that we are straying from the agenda."

Vang looked at her. "Yes, honorable President. Please forgive me."

"The matter of withdrawal," said President Gram, "to recognized truce lines."

Species at this stage of their development tend to be territorial, Memory reminded Drill. *Their political mentality is based around the concept of borders. The idea of a borderless community of species may be perceived as a threat.*

I'll try and go easy on them, Drill said.

"The Memories on our terraforming Ships will be adjusted to account

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for your species," Drill said. "After the adjustment, your people will no longer be in danger."

"In our case, it will take the disengage order several months to reach all our forces," President Gram said. "How long will the order take to reach your own Ships?"

"A century or so." The Shars stared. "Memories at our exploration basis in this area will be adjusted first, of course, and these will adjust the Memories of terraforming Ships as they come in for maintenance and supplies."

"We'll be subject to attack for *another hundred years?*" Vang's tone mixed incredulity and scorn.

"Our terraforming Ships move more or less at random, and only come into base when they run out of supplies. We don't know where they've been till they report back. Though they're bound to encounter a few more of your planets, your species will still survive, enough to continue your species evolution. And during that time you'll be searching for and occupying new planets on your own. You'll probably come out of this with a net gain."

"*Have you no respect for life?*" Vang demanded. Drill considered his answer.

"All individuals die, Opposite Minister-General," he said. "That is a fact of nature which no species has been able to alter. Only species can survive. Individuals are easily replaceable. Though you will lose some planets and a large number of individuals, your species as a whole will survive and may even prosper. What more could a species or its delegated representatives desire?"

Opposite Minister-General Vang was glaring at Drill, his ears pricked forward, lips drawn back from his teeth. He said nothing.

"We desire a cease-fire that is a true cease-fire," President Gram said. Her hands were clasping and unclasping rhythmically on the edge of her chair. "Not a slow, authorized extermination of our species. Your position has an unwholesome smell. I am afraid we must end these discussions until you alter it."

"Position? This is not a position, honorable President. It is truth."

"We have nothing further to say."

Unhappily, Drill followed the Shar delegation to the airlock. "I do not lie, honorable President," he said, but Gram only turned away and silently left the human Ship. The Shars in their pale thousands received her.

The Shar broadcasts were not heartening. Opposite Minister-General Vang was particularly vehement. Drill collected the highlights of the speeches as he speeded through Memory's detailed remembrance. "Cal-

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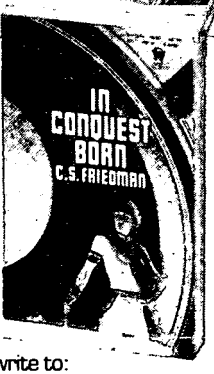

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lous disregard . . . no common ground for communication . . . casual attitude toward atrocity . . . displays of obvious savagery . . . no respect for the individual . . . defend ourselves . . . this stinks in the nose."

The Shars leaped and barked in response. There were strange bubbling high-pitched laughing sounds that Drill found unsettling.

"We hope to find a formula for peace," President Gram said. "We will confer with all the ministers in session." That was all.

That night, the Shars surrounding Ship moaned, moving slowly in a giant circle, their arms linked. The laughing sounds that followed Vang's speech did not cease entirely. He did not understand why they did not all go home and sleep.

Long, long, Memory said. No comfort there.

Early in the morning, before dawn, there was a communication from President Gram. "I would like to meet with you privately. Away from the recorders, the coalition partners."

"I would like nothing better," Drill said. He felt a small current of optimism begin to trickle into him.

"Can I use an airlock other than the one we've been using up till now?"

Drill gave President Gram instructions and met her in the other airlock. She was wearing a night cape with a hood. The Shars, circling and moaning, had paid her no attention.

"Thank you for seeing me under these conditions," she said, peering up at him from beneath the hood. Drill smiled. She shuddered.

"I am pleased to be able to cooperate," he said.

Mash! Lowbrain demanded. It had been silent until Drill entered Zen Synch. Drill told it to be silent with a snarling vehemence that silenced it for the present.

"This way, honorable President," Drill said. He took her to his sleeping chamber—a small room, only fifty feet square. "Shall I send a Frog for one of your chairs?" he asked.

"I will stand. Three legs seem to be more comfortable than two for standing."

"Yes."

"Is it possible, Ambassador Drill, that you could lower the intensity of the light here? I find it oppressive."

Drill felt foolish, knowing he should have thought of this himself. "I'm sorry," he said. "I will give the orders at once. I wish you had told me earlier." He smiled nervously as he dimmed the lights and arranged himself on his Slab.

"Honorable ambassador." President Gram's words seemed hesitant. "I wonder if it is possible . . . can you tell me the meaning of that facial gesture of yours, showing me your teeth?"

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"It is called a smile. It is intended as a gesture of benevolent reassurance."

"Showing of the teeth is considered a threat here, honorable Ambassador. Some of us have considered this a sign that you wish to eat us."

Drill was astonished. "My goodness!" he said. "I don't even eat meat! Just a kind of vegetable mash."

"I pointed out that your teeth seemed unsuitable for eating meat, but still it makes us uneasy. I was wondering . . . "

"I will try to suppress the smile, yes. Eating meat! What an idea. Some of our military specialists, yes, and of course the Sharks and Shrikes and so on . . . " He told his Memory to enforce a strict ban against smiling in the presence of a Shar.

Gram leaned back on her sturdy rear leg. Her cape parted, revealing her ribbons and badges of office, her four furry dugs. "I wanted to inform you of certain difficulties here, Ambassador Drill," she said. "I am having difficulty holding together my coalition. Minister-General Vang's faction is gaining strength. He is attempting to create a perception in the minds of Shars that you are untrustworthy and violent. Whether he believes this, or whether he is using this notion as a means of destabilizing the coalition, is hardly relevant—considering your species' unprovoked attacks, it is not a difficult perception to reinforce. He is also trying to tell our people that the military is capable of dealing with your species."

Drill's brain swam with Memory's information on concepts such as "faction" and "coalition." The meaning of the last sentence, however, was clear.

"That is a foolish perception, honorable President," he said.

"His assurances on that score lack conviction." Gram's eyes were shiny. Her tone grew earnest. "You must give me something, ambassador. Something I can use to soothe the public mind. A way out of this dilemma. I tell you that it is impossible to expect us to sit idly by and accept the loss of an undefined number of planets over the next hundred years. I plead with you, ambassador. Give me something. Some way we can avoid attack. Otherwise . . . " She left the sentence incomplete.

Mash, Lowbrain wailed. Drill ignored it. He moved into Zen Synch with Memory, racing through possible solutions. Sweat gathered on his forehead, pouring down his vast shoulders.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, there is a possibility. If you could provide us with the location of all your occupied planets, we could dispatch a Ship to each with the appropriate Memories as cargo. If any of our terraforming Ships arrived, the Memories could be transferred at once, and your planets would be safe."

President Gram considered this. "Memories," she said. "You've been using the term, but I'm not sure I understand."

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"Stored information is vast, and even though human bodies are large we cannot always have all the information we need to function efficiently even in our specialized tasks," Drill said. "Our human brains have been separated as to function. I have a Lowbrain, which is on my spinal cord above my pelvis. Lowbrain handles motor control of my lower body, routine monitoring of my body's condition, eating, excretion, and sex. My perceptual centers, short-term memory, personality, and reasoning functions are handled by the brain in my skull—the classical brain, if you like. Long-term and specialized memory is the function of the large knob you see moving on my head, my Memory. My Memory records all that happens in great detail, and can recapitulate it at any point. It has also been supplied with information concerning the human species' contacts with other nonhuman groups. It attaches itself easily to my nervous system and draws nourishment from my body. Specific memories can be communicated from one living Memory to another, or if it proves necessary I can simply give my Memory to another human, a complete transfer. I have another Memory aboard that I'm not using at the moment, a pilot Memory that can navigate and handle Ship, and I wore this Memory while in transit. I also have spare Memories in case my primary Memories fall ill. So you see, our specialization does not rule out adaptability—any piece of information needed by any of us can easily be transferred, and in far greater detail than by any mechanical medium."

"So you could return to your base and send out pilot Memories to our planets," Gram said. "Memories that could halt your terraforming ships."

"That is correct." Just in time, Memory managed to stop the twitch in Drill's cheeks from becoming a smile. Happiness bubbled up in him. He was going to arrange this peace after all!

"I am afraid that would not be acceptable, your Excellency," President Gram said. Drill's hopes fell.

"Whyever not?"

"I'm afraid the Minister-General would consider it a naïve attempt of yours to find out the location of our populated planets. So that your species could attack them, ambassador."

"I'm trying very hard, President Gram," Drill said.

"I'm sure you are."

Drill frowned and went into Zen Synch again, ignoring Lowbrain's plantive cries for mash and sex, sex and mash. Concepts crackled through his mind. He began to develop an erection, but Memory was drawing off most of the available blood and the erection failed. The smell of Drill's sweat filled the room. President Gram wrinkled her nose and leaned back far onto her rear leg.

"Ah," Drill said. "A solution. Yes. I can have my Pilot memory provide

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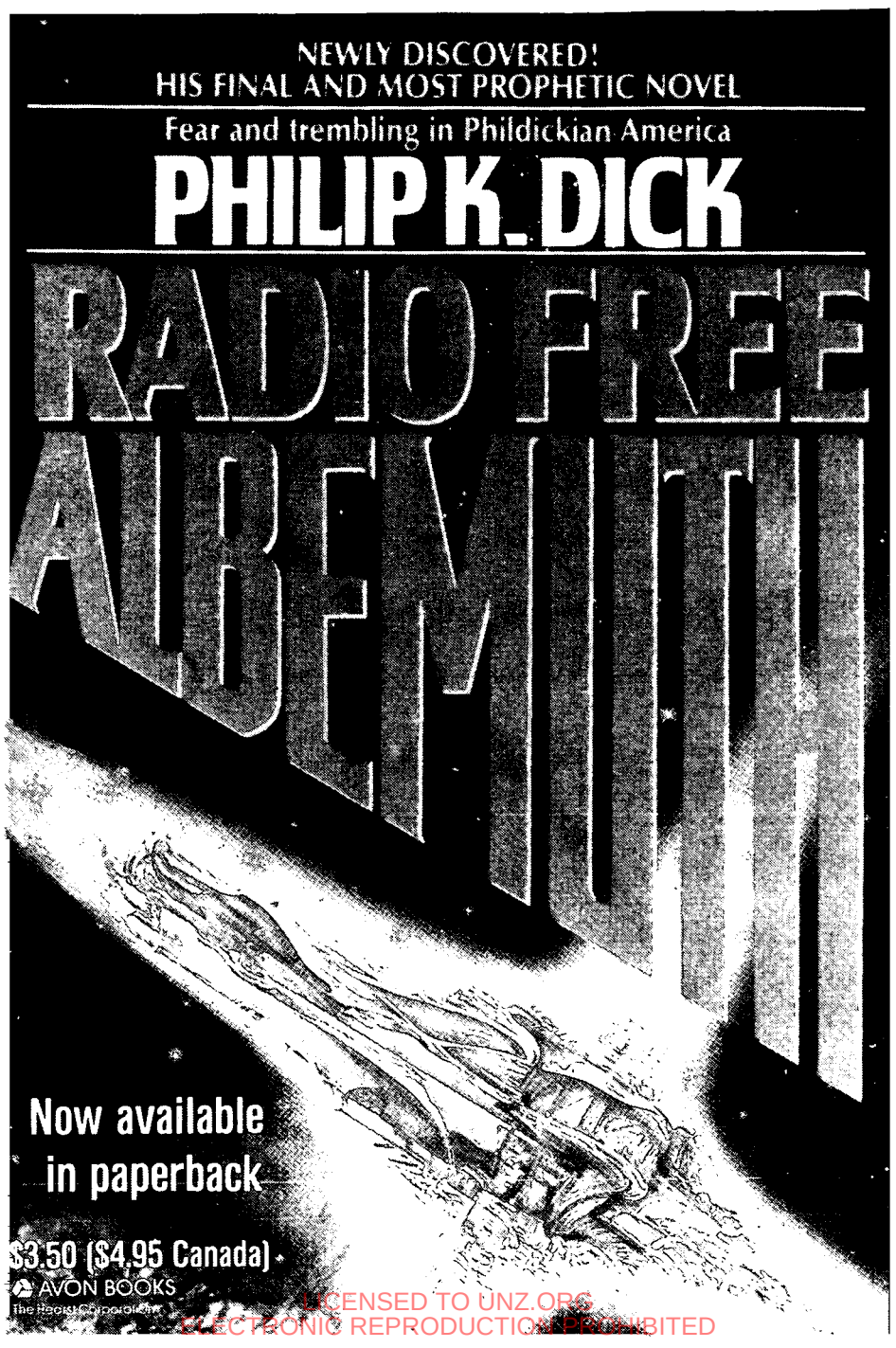

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the locations to an equivalent number of our own planets. We will have one another's planets as hostage."

"Bravo, ambassador," President Gram said quietly. "I think we may have a solution. But—forgive me—it may be said that we cannot trust your information. We will have to send ships to verify the location of your planets."

"If your ships go to my planet first," Drill said, "I can provide your people with one of my spare Memories that will inform my species what your people are doing, and instruct the humans to cooperate. We will have to construct some kind of link between your radio and my Memory . . . maybe I can have my Ship grow one."

President Gram came forward off her third leg and began to pace forward, moving in her strange, fast, hobbling way. "I can present it to the council this way, yes," she said. "There is hope here." She stopped her movement, peering up at Drill with her ears pricked forward. "Is it possible that you could allow me to present this to the council as my own idea?" she asked. "It may meet with less suspicion that way."

"Whatever way is best," said Drill. President Gram gazed into the darkened recesses of the room.

"This smells good," she said. Drill succeeded in suppressing his smile.

"It's nice to see you again."

"I am Drill."

"It's nice to see you again, Drill."

"I think we can make the peace work."

"Everything will be all right, Drill. Drill, I'm sure everything will be all right."

"I'm so glad I had this chance. This is the chance of a lifetime."

"Drill, it's *nice* to see you again."

The next day President Gram called and asked to present a new plan. Drill said he would be pleased to hear it. He met the party at the airlock, having already dimmed the lights. He was very rigid in his attempts not to smile.

They sat in the dimmed room while President Gram presented the plan. Drill pretended to think it over, then acceded. Details were worked out. First the location of one human planet would be given and verified—this planet, the Shar capital, would count as the first revealed Shar planet. After verification, each side would reveal the location of two planets, verify those, then reveal four, and so on. Even counting the months it would take to verify the location of planets, the treaty should be completed within less than five years.

That night the Shars went mad. At President Gram's urging, they

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built fires, danced, screamed, sang. Drill watched on his Ship's video walls. Their rhythms beat at his head.

He smiled. For hours.

The Ship obligingly grew a communicator and coupled it to one of Drill's spare Memories. The two were put aboard a Shar ship and sent in the direction of Drill's home. Drill remained in his ship, watching entertainment videos Ship received from the Shars' channels. He didn't understand the dramas very well, but the comedies were delightful. The Shars could do the most intricate, clever things with their flexible bodies and odd tripod legs—it was delightful to watch them.

Maybe I could take some home with me, he thought. *They can be very entertaining.*

The thousands of Shars waiting outside Ship began to drift away. Within a month only a few hundred were left. Their singing was quiet, triumphant, assured. Sometimes Drill had it piped into his sleeping chamber. It helped him relax.

President Gram visited informally every ten days or so. Drill showed her around Ship, showing her the pilot Memory, the Frog quarters, the giant stardrive engines with their human subspecies' implanted connections, Surrogate in its shadowed, pleasant room. The sight of Surrogate seemed to agitate the President.

"You do not use sex for procreation?" she asked. "As an expression of affection?"

"Indeed we do. I have scads of offspring. There are never enough diplomats, so we have a great many couplings among our subspecies. As for affection . . . I think I can say that I have enjoyed the company of each of my partners."

She looked up at him with solemn eyes. "You travel to the stars, Drill," she said. "Your species expands randomly in all directions, encountering other species, sometimes annihilating them. Do you have a reason for any of this?"

"A reason?" Drill mused. "It is natural to us. Natural to all intelligent species, so far as we know."

"I meant a conscious reason. Is it anything other than what you do in an automatic way?"

"I can't think of why we would need any such reasons."

"So you have no philosophy of constant expansion? No ideology?"

"I do not know what those words mean," Drill said.

Gram closed her eyes and lowered her head. "I am sorry," she said.

"No need. We have no conflicts in our ideas about ourselves, about our lives. We are happy with what we are."

"Yes. You couldn't be unhappy if you tried, could you?"

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"No," Drill said cheerfully. "I see that you understand."

"Yes," Gram said. "I scent that I do."

"In a few million years," Drill said, "these things will become clear to you."

The first Shar ship returned from Drill's home, reporting a transfer of the Memory. The field around Ship filled again with thousands of Shars, crying their happiness to the skies. Other Memories were now taking instructions to all terraforming bases. The locations of two new planets were released. Ships carrying spare Memories leaped into the skies.

It's working, Drill told Memory.

Long, Memory said. *Very long*.

But Memory could not lower Drill's joy. This was what he had lived his life for, and he knew he was good at it. Memories of the future would take this solution as a model for negotiations with other species. Things were working out.

One night the Shars outside Ship altered their behavior. Their singing became once again a moaning, mixed with cries. Drill was disturbed.

A communication came from the President. "Cup is dead," she said.

"I understand," Drill said. "Who is his replacement?"

Drill could not read Gram's expression. "That is not yet known. Cup was a strong person, and did not like other strong people around him. Already the successors are fighting for the leadership, but they may not be able to hold his faction together." Her ears flickered. "I may be weakened by this."

"I regret things tend that way."

"Yes," she said. "So do I."

The second set of ships returned. More Memories embarked on their journeys. The treaty was holding.

There was a meeting aboard Ship to formalize the agreement. Cup's successor was Brook, a tall, elderly Shar whose golden fur was darkened by age. A compromise candidate, President Gram said, his election determined after weeks of fighting for the successorship. He was not respected. Already pieces of Cup's old faction were breaking away.

"I wonder, your Excellency," Brook said, after the formal business was over, "if you could arrange for our people to learn your language. You must have powerful translation modules aboard your ship in order to learn our language so quickly. You were broadcasting your message of peace within a few hours of entering real space."

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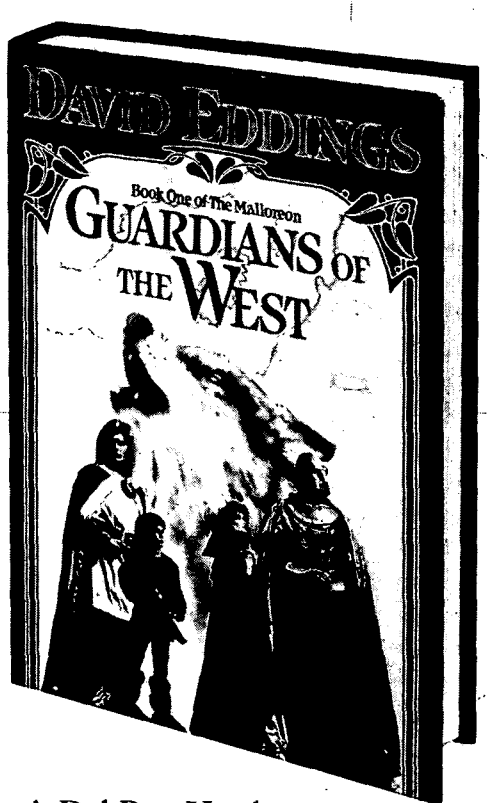

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"I have no such equipment aboard Ship," Drill said. "Our knowledge of your language was acquired from Shar prisoners."

"Prisoners?" Shar ears pricked forward. "We were not aware of this," Brook said.

"After our base Memories recognized discrepancies," Drill said, "we sent some Ships out searching for you. We seized one of your ships and took it to my home world. The prisoners were asked about their language and the location of your capital planet. Otherwise it would have taken me months to find your world here, and learn to communicate with you."

"May we ask to arrange for the return of the prisoners?"

"Oh." Drill said. "That won't be possible. After we learned what we needed to know, we terminated their lives. They were being kept in an area reserved for a garden. The landscapers wanted to get to work." Drill bobbed his head reassuringly. "I am pleased to inform you that they proved excellent fertilizer for the gardens. The result was quite lovely."

"I think," said President Gram carefully, "that it would be best that this information not go beyond those of us in this room. I think it would disturb the process."

Minister-General Vang's ears went back. So did others'. But they acceded.

"I think we should take our leave," said President Gram.

"Have a pleasant afternoon," said Drill.

"It's important." It was not yet dawn. Ship had awakened Drill for a call from the President. "One of your ships has attacked another of our planets."

Alarm drove the sleep from Drill's brain. "Please come to the airlock," he said.

"The information will reach the population within the hour."

"Come quickly," said Drill.

The President arrived with a pair of assistants, who stayed inside the airlock. They carried staves. "My people will be upset," Gram said. "Things may not be entirely safe."

"Which planet was it?" Drill asked.

Gram rubbed her ears. "It was one of those whose location went out on the last peace shuttle."

"The new Memory must not have arrived in time."

"That is what we will tell the people. That it couldn't have been prevented. I will try to speed up the process by which the planets receive new Memories. Double the quota."

"That is a good idea."

"I will have to dismiss Brook. Opposite Minister-General Vang will

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have to take his job. If I can give Vang more power, he may remain in the coalition and not cause a split."

"As you think best."

President Gram looked up at Drill, her head rising reluctantly, as if held back by a great weight. "My son," she said. "He was on the planet when it happened."

"You have other offspring," Drill said.

Gram looked at him, the pain burning deep in her eyes. "Yes," she said. "I do."

The fields around Ship filled once again. Cries and howls rent the air, and dirges pulsed against Ship's uncaring walls. The Shar broadcasts in the next weeks seemed confused to Drill. Coalitions split and fragmented. Vang spoke frequently of readiness. President Gram succeeded in doubling the quota of planets. The decision was a near one.

Then, days later, another message. "One of our commanders," said President Gram, "was based on the vicinity of the attacked planet. He is one of Vang's creatures. On his own initiative he ordered our military forces to engage. Your terraforming Ship was attacked."

"Was it destroyed?" Drill asked. His tone was urgent. There is still hope, he reminded himself.

"Don't be anxious for your fellow humans," Gram said. "The Ship was damaged, but escaped."

"The loss of a few hundred billion unconscious organisms is no cause for anxiety," Drill said. "An escaped terraforming Ship is. The Ship will alert our military forces. It will be a real war."

President Gram licked her lips. "What does that mean?"

"You know of our Shrikes and so on. Our military people are worse. They are fully conscious and highly specialized in different modes of warfare. They are destructive, carnivorous, capable of taking enormous damage without impairing function. Their minds concentrate only on tactics, on destruction. Normally they are kept on planetoids away from the rest of humanity. Even other humans find their proximity too . . . disturbing." Drill put all the urgency in his speech that he could. "Honorable President, you must give me the locations of the remaining planets. If I can get Memories to each of them with news of the peace, we may yet save them."

"I will try. But the coalition . . . " She turned away from the transmitter. "Vang will claim a victory."

"It is the worst possible catastrophe," Drill said.

Gram's tone was grave. "I believe you," she said.

Drill listened to the broadcasts with growing anxiety. The Shars who

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spoke on the broadcasts were making angry comments about the execution of prisoners, about flower gardens and values Drill didn't understand. Someone had let the secret loose. President Gram went from group to group outside Ship, talking of the necessity of her plan. The Shars' responses were muted. Drill sensed they were waiting. It was announced that Vang had left the coalition. A chorus of triumphant yips rose from scattered members of the crowd. Others only moaned.

Vang, now simply General Vang, arrived at the field. His followers danced intoxicated circles around him as he spoke, howling their responses to his words. "Triumph! United will!" they cried. "The humans can be beaten! Treachery avenged! Dictate the peace from a position of strength! We smell the location of their planets!"

The Shars' weird cackling laughter followed him from point to point. The laughing and crying went on well into the night. In the morning the announcement came that the coalition had fallen. Vang was now President-General.

In his sleeping chamber, surrounded by his video walls, Drill began to weep.

"I have been asked to bear Vang's message to you," Gram said. She seemed smaller than before, standing unsteadily even on her tripod legs. "It is his . . . humor."

"What is the message?" Drill said. His whole body seemed in pain. Even Lowbrain was silent, wrapped in misery.

"I had hoped," Gram said, "that he was using this simply as an issue on which to gain power. That once he had the Presidency, he would continue the diplomatic effort. It appears he really means what he's been saying. Perhaps he's no longer in control of his own people."

"It is war," Drill said.

"Yes."

You have failed, said Memory. Drill winced in pain.

"You will lose," he said.

"Vang says we are cleverer than you are."

"That may be the case. But cleverness cannot compete with experience. Humans have fought hundreds of these little wars, and never failed to wipe out the enemy. Our Memories of these conflicts are intact. Your people can't fight millions of years of specialized evolution."

"Vang's message doesn't end there. You have till nightfall to remove your Ship from the planet. Six days to get out of real space."

"I am to be allowed to live?" Drill was surprised.

"Yes. It is our . . . our custom."

Drill scratched himself. "I regret our efforts did not succeed."

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"No more than I." She was silent for a while. "Is there any way we can stop this?"

"If Vang attacks any human planets after the Memories of the peace arrangement have arrived," Drill said, "the military will be unleashed to wipe you out. There is no stopping them after that point."

"How long," she asked, "do you think we have?"

"A few years. Ten at the most."

"Our species will be dead."

"Yes. Our military are very good at their jobs."

"You will have killed us," Gram said, "destroyed the culture that we have built for thousands of years, and you won't even give it any thought. Your species doesn't think about what it does any more. It just acts, like a single-celled animal, engulfing everything it can reach. You say that you are a conscious species, but that isn't true. Your every action is . . . instinct. Or reflex."

"I don't understand," said Drill.

Gram's body trembled. "That is the tragedy of it," she said.

An hour later Ship rose from the field. Shars laughed their defiance from below, dancing in crazed abandon.

I have failed, Drill told Memory.

You knew the odds were long, Memory said. *You knew that in negotiations with species this backward there have only been a handful of successes, and hundreds of failures.*

Yes, Drill acknowledged. *It's a shame, though. To have spent all these months away from home.*

Eat! Eat! said Lowbrain.

Far away, in their forty-mile-long Ships, the human soldiers were already on their way. ●

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THE WHITE BABE

by Jane Yolen

Jane Yolen's hundredth book, *Sister Light, Sister Dark* (out from Ace Books sometime next year), will be set in the same milieu as "The White Babe." Recent publications by the current president of the Science Fiction Writers of America include *Favorite Folktales from Around the World* (Pantheon's Folklore Series) and the novel, *Cards of Grief.*

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And the prophet says an white babe with black eyes shall be born unto a virgin in the winter of the year. The ox in the field, the hound at the hearth, the bear in the cave, the cat in the tree, all, all shall bow before her singing, "Holy, holy, holiest of sisters, who is both black and white, both dark and light, your coming is the beginning and it is the end." Three times shall her mother die and three times shall she be orphaned and she shall be set apart that all shall know her. —So goes the Garunian prophecy about the magical birth of the White Babe, layering in all kinds of folkloric absurdities and gnomic utterings to explain away the rise of a female warrior queen. These "hero birth" tales arise long after the fact, and it is no coincidence that one tale resembles another. (C.F. the birth of Alta's *Anna*, or *the white one*, motif #275f in Hyatt's *Folklore Motif Index of the Dales*.) This one points to the birth of White Jenna, the Amazonian queen of the Dark Riding, a figure of some staying power in the myth sequences out of the early Garunian period during and after the infamous Gender Wars.

1.
THE WHITE BABE

The Myth:

Then Great Alta plaited the left side of her hair, the golden side, and let it fall into the sinkhole of night. And there she drew up the queen of shadows and set her upon the earth. Next she plaited the right side of her hair, the dark side, and with it she caught the queen of light. And she set her next to the black queen.

"And you two shall be sisters," quoth Great Alta. "You shall be as images in a glass, the one reflecting the other. As I have bound you in my hair, so it shall be."

Then she twined her living braids around and about them and they were as one.

The Legend:

It happened in the town of Slipskin on a day far into the winter's rind that a strange and wonderful child was born. As her mother, who was but a girl herself, knelt between the piles of skins, straddling the shallow hole in the earth floor, the birth cord descended between her legs like a rope. The child emerged, feet first, climbing down the cord. When her tiny toes touched the ground, she bent down and cut the cord with her teeth, saluted the astonished midwife, and walked out the door.

The midwife fainted dead away, but when she came to and discovered the child gone and the mother dead of blood-loss, she told her eldest

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daughter what had happened. At first they thought to hide what had occurred. But miracles have a way of announcing themselves. The daughter told a sister who told a friend and, in that way, the story was uncovered.

The tale of that rare birthing is still recounted in Slipskin—now called New Moulting—to this very day. They say the child was the White Babe, Jenna, Sister Light of the Dark Riding, the Anna.

The Story:

It was an ordinary birth until the very end and then the child hurtled screaming from the womb, the cord wrapped around her tiny hands. The village midwife echoed the baby's scream. Although she had attended many births, and some near miraculous with babes born covered with cauls or twins bound together with a mantling of skin, the midwife had never heard anything like this. Quickly she made the sign of the goddess with her right hand, thumb and forefinger curved and touching, and cried out, "Great Alta, save us."

At the name, the babe was quiet.

The midwife sighed and picked up the child from the birth hide stretched over the hole scraped in the floor. "She is a girl," the midwife said, "the Goddess' own. Blessed be." She turned to the new mother and only then realized that she spoke to a corpse.

Well, what was the midwife to do then but cut the cord and tend the living first. The dead mother would wait for her washing and the mourning her man would make over her, with the patience of eternity. But so as not to have the haunt follow her down the rest of her days, the midwife spoke a quick prayer as she went about the first lessons of the newborn:

In the name of the cave,
The dark grave,
And all who swing twixt
Light and light,
Great Alta,
Take this woman
Into your sight.
Wrap her in your hair
And cradled there,
Let her be a babe again,
Forever.

"And that should satisfy her," the midwife mumbled to herself, knowing that to be a babe again, to be cradled against the breast of the eternal Alta, was the goal of all life. She had faith the quick prayer would shrive the poor dead woman at least until the candles could be lit, one for each year of her life and an extra for her shadow-soul, at the bedfoot. Meanwhile there was the child, blessedly a girl, and blessedly alive. In these

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past years of hard living it was not always so. But the man was lucky. He had only to grieve for one.

Once cleansed of the birthblood, the midwife saw the babe was fair-skinned with a fine covering of white hair on her head and tiny arms. Her body was unblemished and her pale blue eyes looked as if they could already see, following the midwife's finger left and right, up and down. And if that were not miracle enough, the child's little hand locked upon the midwife's finger with a hold that could not be broken, not even when a suck was made for her using a linen cloth twisted about and dipped in goat's milk. Even then she hung on, though she pulled on the makeshift teat with long, rhythmic sighs.

When the child's father came back from the fields and could be torn from his dead wife's side long enough to touch the babe, she was still holding the midwife's finger.

"She's a fighter," said the midwife, offering the bundle to his arms.

He would not take her. It was all he could do to care. The white babe was a poor, mewling exchange for his lusty redheaded wife. He touched the child's head gently, where beneath the fragile shield of skin the pulse beat, and said, "Then if you think her a fighter, give her to the warrior women in the mountains to foster. I cannot bide her while I grieve her mother. She is the sole cause of my loss. I cannot love where loss is so great." He said it quietly and without apparent anger, for he was ever a quiet, gentle man, but the midwife heard the rock beneath the quiet tone. It was the kind of rock against which a child would bruise herself again and again to no avail.

She said then what she thought right. "The mountain tribes will take her and love her as you cannot. They are known for their mothering. And I swear they will bring her to a stranger destiny than her tiny gripping hand and her early sight have already foretold."

If he remarked her words, the man did not respond, his shoulders already set in the grief he would carry with him to his own grave, and that—though he knew it not—soon enough, for as they said often enough in Slipskin, *The heart is not a knee that can bend.*

So the midwife took the child and left. She paused only long enough to cry out the village diggers and two women to bathe and shroud the corpse before it set badly in the rigor of death. She told them of the child's miraculous birth, the wonder of it still imprinted on her face.

Because she was known to be a stubborn woman with a mind set in a single direction—like a needle in water pointing north—none of them gainsayed her going to the mountain clans. They did not know she was more frightened than even she herself knew, frightened of both the child and the trip. One part of her hoped the villagers would stop her. But the other part, the stubborn part, would have gone whatever they said and

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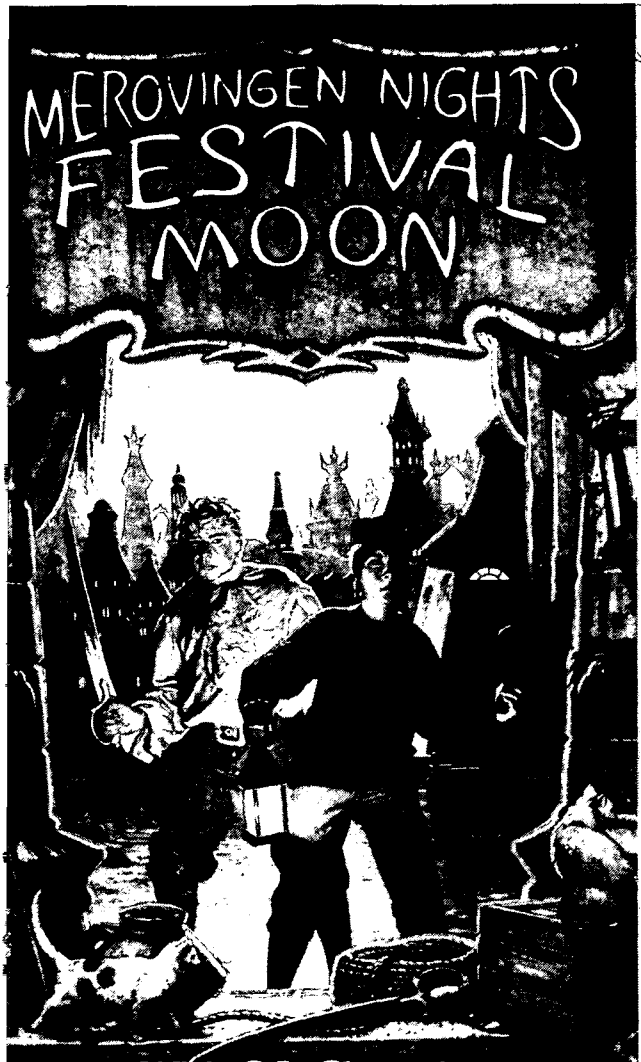

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perhaps they guessed it and saved their breath for telling her story afterwards. For as it was said in Slipskin, *Telling a tale is better than living it.*

And so the midwife turned toward the mountains where she had never been before, trusting Great Alta's guardians to track her before she was gone too far and clutching the child to her breast like an amulet.

It was luck that an early spring melt had cleared most of the paths to the mountain foot or the midwife would never have gotten even that far. She was a woman of the towns, her duties bringing her from house to house like a scavenger. She knew nothing of the forest perils or the great tan-colored cats that roamed the rockslides. With the babe swaddled and wrapped to her breast, she had started out bravely enough and managed surprisingly well, getting to the mountain foot without a scratch or slip. Many a strong hunting man had not done as well that year. And perhaps it was true, as the villagers said, that *Fish are not the best authority on water.*

She sheltered the first night among the twisted roots of a blasted tree, giving the child suck from a milk crock with a linen teat dipped in. Herself, she ate cheese and brown bread and stayed warm with half a skin of sweet wine she carried. She ate unsparingly for she thought she had but a single overnight to go before she reached the holds of the mountain clans. And she was sure the women of the mountains—whom she had long desired to visit, that longing compounded of envy and fear—would give her plenty of food and drink and gold to sustain her when they saw what it was she carried to them. She was a townswoman in her thinking, always trade for trade. She did not understand the mountains or the people who lived there; she did not know that they would feed her independent of all else but her need and that they had little use for gold so never kept it.

The second day was bright and pearly. Clouds lined only the horizon. She chose to walk along the bank of a swift-flowing stream because it seemed easier than breaking a new trail. If she had noticed the scat and could have read it, she would have known this was a favorite run of mountain cats, for trout were plentiful in the stream, and foolish, especially in the evening in the presence of bugs. But she was a woman of the town and she could read print only, a minor learning, and so she never heard the cat on her trail nor noticed its scratchy warnings on the trees.

That second night she stashed the babe in a high crotch of a tree, believing it quite safe there, and walked down to the stream to bathe in the moonlight. Being a townswoman and a midwife she valued cleanliness above all other things.

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It was while she was bent over, dipping her hair in the cold water of the stream and muttering aloud about how long the trip was taking, that the cat struck. Swiftly, silently, surely. She never felt more than a moment of pain. But at her death the child cried out, a high thin wailing. The cat, startled, dropped its prey and looked about uneasily.

An arrow took it in the eye, its death more painful than the midwife's. It whimpered and trembled for several moments before one of the hunters cut its throat in pity.

The babe in the tree cried out again and the entire wood seemed to still at the sound.

"What was that?" asked the heavier of the two hunters, the one who had cut the cat's throat. They were both kneeling over the dead woman seeking in vain for a pulse.

"Perhaps the lion had cubs and they are hungry?"

"Do not be foolish, Marjo, this early in spring?"

The thinner hunter shrugged her shoulders.

The child, uncomfortable in its makeshift cradle, cried out again.

The hunters stood.

"That is no lion cub," said Marjo.

"But cub nonetheless," said her companion.

They went to the tree as unerringly as woodsense could lead them and found the babe.

"Alta's Hairs!" said the first hunter. She took the child from the tree, unwrapped it, and gazed at its smooth, fair-skinned body.

Marjo nodded. "A girl, Selna."

"Bless you," whispered Selna, but whether she spoke to Marjo or to the dead midwife or to the ears of Alta, high and far away, was not clear.

They buried the midwife and it was a long and arduous task for the ground was still part frozen. Then they skinned the cat and wrapped the babe in its warm skin. The child settled into her new wrapping and fell asleep at once.

"She was meant for us," said Selna. "She does not even wrinkle her nose at the cat smell."

"She is too young to wrinkle her nose."

Selna ignored the remark and gazed at the child. "It is true, then, what the villagers say, *When a dead tree falls, it carries with it a live one.*"

"You speak too often with another's mouth," said Marjo. "And a village mouth at that."

"And you speak with mine."

They were silent after that, neither saying a word as they trotted along the familiar paths toward the mountains and home.

They expected no grand reception at their return and got none, though

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their coming had been remarked by many hidden watchers. They signaled their secret names with careful hand signs at every appointed place, and the guardians of each of those turnings melted back into the forest or the seemingly impenetrable rockface without a sound.

What messages, what bits of news were passed to them as they traveled through the night came to them in the form of bird song or the howling fall of a wolf's call, where bird and wolf were not. It told them they were welcome and recognized and one particular cry told them to bring their bundle at once to the great hall. They understood, though no words, no human words, were exchanged.

But before they reached the hall, the moon slipped down behind the western mountains and Marjo bade farewell to her companion and disappeared.

Hefting the child in its cat cloak, Selna whispered, "Till evening, then." But she said it so softly, the child in her arms did not even stir.

The Song:

Lullabye to the Cat's Babe

Hush little mountain cat,
Sleep in your den,
I'll sing of your mother
Who cradled Fair Jen.

I'll sing of your mother
Who covered Jen's skin.
Flesh of your flesh
Did sweet Jenna lay in.

Sleep, little catkin,
Perchance you shall dream
Of rabbit and pheasant
And trout in the stream.

But Jenna will dream
Of the dark and the light
Your mother will shelter her
From the cold night.

The Story:

There were cradles scattered around the Great Hall, some of oak with the grain running like rivers to the sea, and some of white pine, so soft the marks of a baby's nails could be seen, like runes, on the headboards.

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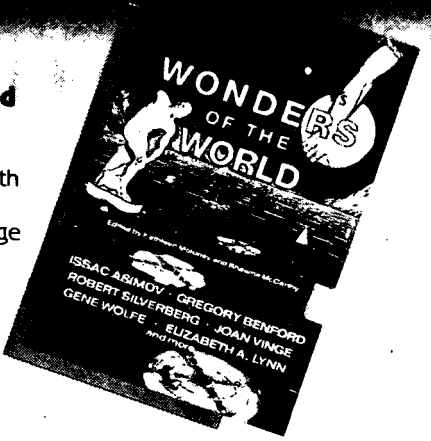

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But for some reason Selna did not put the child in any of them. She kept it on her breast when she showed it in the Great Hall and all the rest of the day, hoping the steady beat of her heart would comfort it.

It was not unusual for a new fosterling to be kept, swaddled, at one breast or another. The women of Alta's-hame shared the care of them, though Selna had never before shown any interest in fostering. The stink of the babes and their high, cranky crying had always put her off. But this one was different. She smelled not of sour milk and spittle but of mountain cat, moonshine, and blackthorn, that being the tree she had been wedged in when the cat had struck her mother. She had cried only twice, each time at a death, which Selna thought an omen. Surely the child must be hungry or fearful or cold. Selna was ready to put her away at the first sign of fretting. But the babe had stared at her with eyes the color of a spring sky, as if reading her very soul. And so Selna had kept her heart to heart far into the morning. By then everyone had noticed and commented so that she could not—for fear of being shamed—let her small burden go. Physical abuse had never bothered Selna. Indeed she was proud of her ability to withstand the worst punishments. She was always in the forefront of any battleline, she was the last to the fire, the first into a cold stream. But she could never stand the tauntings of the women in her Hame.

By mid morning, though, the child was hungry and let her know with small pipings, like a chick in the henyard. She fed the babe as best she could with one of the Eastern bottles so prized by the kitcheners. Both she and the babe were thoroughly splattered in the process, and so Selna took the child down to the baths, heated the water well below her usual steaming, and holding the naked child against her own bare shoulder, plunged in.

At the water's touch, the child cooed contentedly and fell asleep. Selna sat on the third step of the bath so that only their heads showed above the water. She stayed until her fingers had wrinkled and the water began to grow chill and her hand around the child cramped. Then she got out reluctantly, dried the sleeping babe, and wrapped toweling around herself for the long walk back to her room. This time there were no comments even though she passed many of her hamemates. Whether she willed it or not, the child was hers.

The History:

The women of the mountain warrior clans did not take fostering lightly. Once a child was chosen by her foster mother, the woman had full charge of the child's care. A kitchener's child grew up amongst the great pots; took her first steps on the tiled kitchen floor; ate, napped, and slept out her childhood sicknesses in a special children's nook in the kitchen.

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So, too, a child chosen for rearing by one of the warrior/huntresses was carried about in a special pack wherever her foster mother went. Lowentrout finds evidence of this in the famous Baryard Tapestries (his essay "Packchildren of the Western Holds," Nature and History *Vol. 39, is especially interesting). There is a leathern pack unearthed from the famous gravemound at Arrundale and preliminary examination leads to speculation that it may be one of the Amazonian child-carriers. (For more about this dig, see Sigel and Salmon's video "Graverobbing Among the Dales.") Such burdens did not hamper the women warriors either in battle or on the hunt, according to Lowentrout, and textual evidence supports his claim. The three scrolls ascribed to the Great Archive of G'run Longbow graphically depict the battles in which the mountain clans took part. One in particular speaks of "the double heads of the amazons" and, in another place, "the precious burden carried by (them)." And most striking, "She fought, all the ways her breast to the foe for as not to expose the one at her back." Vargo argues that the word "at" simply refers to another fighter since fighting back-to-back was a familiar style in swords-battle. She further states that if a pack-child had been meant, the word "on" rather than "at" would have been used. However, Doyle, whose seminal work on Altalinguistics has just been published, points out that in the old tongue* on/at/upon *and* by *are used interchangeably.*

The Story:

"You will have to name her, you know," Marjo said that night, lying on the far side of the bed. The lantern hanging above them cast shadows on the wall and floor.

Selna looked at the child sleeping between them. She touched the soft cheek with a tentative finger. "If I name her, she really is mine forever."

"Forever is longer than either one of us shall last," said Marjo, her finger stroking the child's other cheek.

"A child is a kind of immortality," Selna murmured. "A link forged. A bond. Even if she is not of my blood."

"She will be," Marjo said. "If you claim her."

"How can I not—now?" Selna sat up and Marjo followed suit. "She looks to me first, whoever holds her. She trusts me. When I brought her into the kitchen at dinner and everyone wanted to touch her, all the while her tiny head swiveled around to see me."

"You are being sentimental," said Marjo with a laugh. "Newborns cannot swivel their heads. They cannot even see."

"She can. Jenna can."

"So—you have already named her," Marjo said. "And without waiting for my approval."

"You are my sister, not my keeper," Selna answered testily. At the

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sharpness in her voice, the child stirred between them. Selna smiled a lopsided apology. "Besides," she said, "Jenna is just her baby name. I want to name her Jo-an-enna in full."

"*Jo* for lover, *an* for white, *enna* for tree. That makes sense for she was found in a tree and her hair—what there is of it—is white. I presume that *Jo* is because you love her, though I wonder at how quickly such a thing came about. You usually do not *love* so quickly. It is usually your hatred that is quickly aroused."

"Do not be an idiot. *Jo* is for you, Marjo," Selna said, "and well you know it." She reached out to touch her companion across the child.

Marjo's hand met hers halfway and they both smiled.

The child between them cooed.

In the morning Selna took Jenna to the infirmarer, Kadreen, who checked the babe from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet.

"A strong one," said Kadreen. She did not smile but then she rarely did. It was said she had stitched too many wounds and set too many bones to find life amusing enough for a smile. But Selna knew that even as a young woman, before she had chosen her calling, Kadreen had not found much to smile at. Perhaps, Selna thought, the calling found her *because* of that.

"Her fingers grip surprisingly well for a newborn. And she can follow the movement of my hand. That is rare. I clapped my hands to test her hearing and she startled at once. She will be a good companion for you in the woods."

Selna nodded.

"Make sure you feed her at the same time and she will sleep through the night within the first moon's change."

"She slept through the night last night," Selna said.

"She will not again."

But despite the infirmarer's warning, Jenna did sleep soundly through that night and the next. And though Selna tried to feed her on the schedule dictated by Kadreen's long experience with infants, she was always too busy to do so. Yet the babe seemed to thrive on the erratic meals and, in the woods, strapped to Selna's breast or back, she was as quiet as any seasoned hunter.

Selna boasted of her fosterling at every opportunity until everyone but Marjo grew weary of it.

"You are in danger of becoming a bore," said Donya, the head kitchener, when Selna dropped off a fine roebuck and seven rabbits after a two-day hunt. "She is a fine babe, no doubt. Strong and quite pleasant to look upon. But she is not Great Alta. She does not walk across the Lake of

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Sighs nor ride the summer rainbow nor leap between the drops of falling rain."

"I did not say she was the goddess," mumbled Selna. The child at her breast laughed delightedly as she tickled it under the chin with one of the rabbit's feet. Then she looked at the kitchener squarely and roared. "And I am *not* a bore."

"I did not say you were. I said you were in danger of becoming one," said Donya calmly. "Ask anyone."

Selna glared around the kitchen but the girls all dropped their eyes and suddenly the room was quiet of voices. All that could be heard were the *snick-snack* of kitchen knives at work. Donya's young ones knew better than to tangle with one of the warriors. Selna, especially, was known for her hot temper though she, unlike some of them, seldom bore a lasting grudge. Still, not a one of them envied her fosterling that temper when it roared.

Selna shook her head, still angry, and turned back to Donya. "I shall want the rabbit skins," she said. "They will make a soft lining for the pack. Jenna has fine skin."

"Jenna has a baby's skin," said Donya evenly, ignoring Selna's scowl. "And of course you shall have the fur. I'll also save you the deerskin. It should make a fine pair of leggings and many mocs."

Selna smiled suddenly. "She will need many mocs."

"But not right away," Donya said, with a laugh.

There was a titter around the room as her own fosterlings enjoyed the joke.

"What do you mean?" The anger was back in Selna's voice.

Donya set down the heavy crockery bowl and wooden spoon, wiped her hands on her aprons, and held out her arms. Reluctantly Selna recognized the signal and unstrapped the babe, handing it over to Donya.

Donya smiled and rocked the child in her arms. "This is an infant, Selna. A babe. Look around at my own maids. Seven of them. And once they were each this size. They walked at a year, only one sooner. Do not expect too much from your child and she will grow in your love. When her moon time comes, she will not turn from you. When she reads from the *Book of Light* and calls her own sister into this world, she will not foresake you. But if you push her too much, you will push her away. A child is not yours to own but yours to raise. She may not be what you will have her be, but she will be what she has to be. Remember what they say, that *Wood may remain twenty years in the water but it is still not a fish.*"

"Who is becoming the bore now?" asked Selna in a weary voice. She took Jenna, who was still smiling, back from the kitchener and went from the room.

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That night there was a full moon and all the dark sisters were called forth. In the great open amphitheater the circle of women and their children was complete.

Selna stood in the circle's center below the altar which was flanked by three rowan trees. Marjo was by her side. For the first time in almost a year there was a new fosterling to celebrate, though two of the gardeners and one warrior had each borne a babe. But those infants had already had their consecration to the goddess. It was Jenna's turn now.

The priestess sat silently on the backless throne atop the rock altar, her own dark sister throned beside her. Their black hair braided with tiny white flowers, lips stained red with the juice of berries, they waited until the crowd of worshippers quieted. Then they leaned forward, hands on knees, and stared down at Selna and Marjo, but only the priestess herself spoke.

"Who bears the child?"

"Mother, I do," said Selna, raising Jenna to eye level. For her the word mother had a double meaning for the priestess had been her own foster mother, who had grieved sorely when Selna had chosen to follow the warrior way.

"And I," said Marjo.

They stepped together up onto the first altar rise.

"And who bore the child?" the priestess asked.

"Mother, a woman of the town," said Selna.

"She died in the woods," Marjo added.

They mounted the second step.

"And who now bleeds for the child?" the priestess asked.

"She shall have my blood," said Selna.

"And mine." Marjo's voice was a quiet echo.

They reached the third step and the priestess and her dark sister rose. The priestess took the silent babe from Selna's hands, turned, and placed the child upon the throne. Marjo and Selna were beside her in one fluid movement.

Then the priestess dropped to her knees before the child and, taking her long black braid, she wound it about the child's waist. Her sister, on the other side of the throne, did the same. As soon as they were done, Selna and Marjo knelt and offered their hands, wrists up.

Taking a silver pin from a box mounted in the arm of the throne, the priestess pierced Selna's wrist where the blue vein branched. At the same time, her sister with an identical pin did the same for Marjo. They held the warriors wrists together so that the blood flowed each to each.

Next the priestess turned and pricked Jenna lightly, above the navel, signaling to Selna and Marjo silently with her free hand. They bent over

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and placed their wrists side by side on the baby's belly so that their bloods mingled.

Then the priestess and her sister drew their twined braids over the steady hands.

"Blood to blood," the priestess intoned. "Life to life."

The entire congregation of Alta's-hame repeated the words, a rolling echo in the clearing.

"What is the child's name?"

Selna could not keep from smiling. "Jo-an-enna," she said.

The priestess spelled out the name and then, in the old tongue, gave the child her secret name that only the four of them—and Jenna in her time—would know. "Annuanna," she said. "The white birch, the Goddess tree, the tree of everlasting light."

"Annuanna," they whispered to one another and the child.

Then the priestess and her sister unwrapped their hair and stood. Holding their hands over the two kneelers and the babe, both priestess and sister spoke the final prayer.

She who holds us
in her hand,
She who molds us
in this land,
She who drives
away the night,
She who wrote
the Book of Light,
In her name,
Blessed be.

The assembled women all came in perfectly on the responses.

When they were done, Selna and Marjo stood together, Selna holding out the infant so that all could see. At the great cheer that arose below them, Jenna woke up, startled, and began to cry. Selna did not comfort her, though the priestess looked sharply at her. A warrior had to learn young that crying brought no comfort.

Back inside, after the magnificent feast that followed, the baby was handed around the table for all to see. She began in the priestess' arms and was handed over to the plump arms of Donya who dandled her expertly but "as routinely as a bit of mutton just off the spit," Selna commented testily to Marjo. Donya handed the child to the leaner arms of the warriors. They chuckled and clucked at Jenna's chin, and one dark sister threw her up into the air. She screamed with delight, but Selna pushed aside the circle of companions angrily to catch the child on her downward flight.

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"What kind of a misbegotten son-of-a-son are you?" she cried out. "What if the light had failed? Whose arms would have caught her then?"

The dark sister Sammor shrugged her shoulders and laughed. "This late mothering has made mush of your brains, Selna. We are *inside*. There are no clouds to hide the moon. The lights of Alta's-hame never fail."

Selna tucked Jenna under one arm and raised the other to strike Sammor but her hand was caught from behind.

"Selna, she is right and you are wrong in this. The babe is safe," Marjo said. "Come. Drink a toast with us all to forget and forgive, and then we will play at the wands." They brought their arms down together.

But Selna's anger did not abate, which was unusual, and she sat outside the circle of sisters when they threw the wands around the ring in the complicated patterns that trained them for sword-handling.

With Selna out, Marjo could not play either, and she sat across from her sister and sulked as the game went on. It became more and more complex as a second, then a third, and finally a fourth set of wands were introduced into the circle. The flexible willows flipped end over end in the air, passing from woman to woman, from hand to hand, and soon the dining hall was quiet except for the *slip-slap* of the wands as they hit palm after palm after palm.

"The lights!" someone shouted, and a cheer went up from the watchers around the ring. Sammor's sister Amalda nodded and two of the kitcheners, new enough to the sisterhood that they stuck together as close as shadows, rose to stand by the torches that illuminated the circle.

The game went on without stopping, the wands slipping even more quickly through the air. Not a hand had missed since the throws began. The whizzing of the wands as they passed one another was punctuated by the slapping of palms.

Then without warning both torches were doused in the waterbuckets, and the dark sisters in the circle disappeared. The circle was halved and there was a clatter of wands hitting the floor. Only Marjo, who sat beyond the range of the two doused torches, and the dark sisters of the watchers who stood far from the game, remained for the lights from the kitchen shone upon them.

Amalda's voice counted out those who had lost their wands. "Domina, Catrona, Marna." Then she turned and nodded for two new torches to be brought.

The relighted circle arranged itself, as dark sisters appeared again. The losers—Domina, Catrona, and Marna and their dark halves—went into the kitchen for something to drink. Playing at the wands was thirsty work. But Selna stood, the child at her breast, and spoke so loudly no one could miss it.

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"It has been a tiring day, sweet Jenna, and time we were both in bed. I will put out the light tonight."

There was a gasp heard around the circle. To put out the light was to send your sister back into the darkness. To announce it so, was an affront.

Marjo's mouth grew tighter, but she said nothing as she stood with Selna and followed her out of the room. But Sammor spoke to their departing backs.

"Remember, Selna, that it is said *If your mouth turns into a knife, it will cut off your lips.*" She did not expect an answer and, indeed, got none.

"You shamed me," Marjo said softly when they reached their room. "You have never done such a thing before. Selna, what is wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong," Selna answered, arranging the baby in her cot, smoothing the blanket and touching the child's white hair with a finger. She began to hum an old cradle song. "Look! She is already asleep."

"I mean, what is wrong between *us*?" Marjo bent over the cot and stared at the sleeping child. "She *is* a sweetling."

"There, you see? Nothing is wrong between *us*. We both love her."

"How can you love her after so short a time? She is nothing but a bit of flesh and coos. Later she shall be someone to love—strong or weak, bright-eyed or sad, handy with her hands or her mouth. But now she is only . . ." Marjo's voice stopped abruptly in mid-sentence for Selna had blown out the large candle over the bed.

"There is nothing wrong between us now, sister," Selna whispered into the black room.

She lay down on the bed, conscious of Marjo's empty half for her sister could always be counted on to talk and laugh and come up with a quick answer before they slept. Then she turned over and, holding her breath, listened a moment for the baby's breathing. When she was sure the child was safe, she let out the air with a loud percussive sigh and fell asleep.

The History:

The "game of wands" has come down to us in a highly suspect form. It is played today only by girl children in the Upper Dales where the chorus, sung in modal tuning by watchers (usually boys) standing outside the circle goes:

Round and round and round the ring
The willow sword we now do fling.

The concentric circles of players sit on the ground facing one another, wands in hand. Once made of willow (which no longer grows in the Upper Dales though evidence of a different floraculture proves willows may have been plentiful a thousand years ago), the wands today are manufactured

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of a plastine that is both flexible and strong. At a drum signal, the wands are passed from hand to hand in a clockwise manner for seven beats, then returned for seven beats. Next the wands are flipped between the circles in pre-set partnerships for seven more beats. Finally, to the accompaniment of the choral singing of the watchers, and an ever-rapidly increasing pattern beat out on the drum, the wands are flipped across the circle, first to the partner, and back, then to the person directly to the partner's right. The wands must be caught in the sword hand, which gives left-handed players a decided disadvantage in the game. As soon as a player drops a wand, she is "out."

Lowentrout points to the famous "insert piece" of the Baryard Tapestries, which had been found in the vault of the eastern potentate Achmed Mubarek thirty years ago as proof positive that the "game of wands" played by warriors in the mountain clans and the nursery circle game are one and the same. While it is true that the "insert piece" (which has been repaired inexpertly by many Eastern hands—some say as many as thirty times as evidenced by the different colored threads) shows concentric circles of women warriors, they are holding swords, not wands. One of the so-called players is lying on her back, sword in her breast, obviously dead. She is ignored by the other players. Cowan argues forcibly that the "insert piece" has been too mangled over the years to be plain in its correspondences, but that it is more likely a picture of a specific form of execution as the "insert piece" occurs in that section of the tapestry which deals with traitors and spies. Perhaps the true meaning of the "insert piece" will never be known, but Magon's shrill argument that the inner circle consisted of the "dark sisters" or "shadow sisters" who could be seen by the light of the moon or the heavy tallow candles (still popular in the Upper and Lower Dales) and the outer circle was that of the "light sisters" harkens back to the last century when the Luxophists sought to resurrect the "Book of Light" practices. Those practices had been banned for at least seven generations and the "Book of Light" has been so thoroughly discredited by Duane's brilliant "Das Volk lichtet nicht" I need not reiterate her arguments here.

Some confusion over the intricately engraved silver rings found in the Arrundale grave mound still exist. Sigel and Salmon call them "wand holders," giving credence to Magon's shaky thesis, but there is even more evidence that these artifacts are napkin rings or possibly pack cups for long trips, and that is convincingly argued in Cowan's "Rings of the Clans" in Nature and History, *Vol. 51.*

The Story:

Selna's shameful behavior became the talk of the Hame. Though sisters had quarreled before, little fiery arguments that sent a moment of heat

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and light, and then died down without even embers of memory, what Selna did was unheard of. Even the priestess' records mentioned nothing like it, and the Hame had seventeen generations listed and eight great tapestries as well.

Selna stayed in the bright sunlight with her child during the day and at night, babe bound fast to her breast or back, avoided the well-lighted rooms of the Hame. Once or twice, when it was absolutely unavoidable, and Selna had to come into a torch-lit room, Marjo crept behind her, a thin attenuated figure. Gone was the dark sister's robust laughter, her hearty ringing tones.

"Selna," she would cry to her sister's back with a voice like a single strand of sigh, "What is wrong between us?" It was a ghost's voice, hollow and dying. "Selna . . ."

Once, in the kitchen begging some milk for the babe, Selna turned for a moment when Marjo called. She put her hands over the child's ears as if to block out the sound of her sister's voice, though it was so low by now it could scarcely be heard. Behind her, Donya and her own sister Doey and two of the older girls watched in horror. They saw in Marjo's wasting figure their own slow deaths.

Marjo's eyes, the color of bruises, wept black tears. "Sister, why do you do this? I would share the child with you. I have no wish to stand between."

But Selna turned slowly and deliberately away from the pleading figure, back toward the kitchen's light. When she noticed Donya and Doey and the two girls standing there, stricken, she bowed her head and hunched her shoulders up as if expecting a blow. Then she turned and went back without the milk into the darkest part of the hall.

On the thirteenth day of her shame, the priestess banished her from the Hame.

"My daughter," the priestess said, her voice heavy, "you have brought this upon yourself. We cannot stop what you do to your own dark sister. Once you accepted the teachings of the *Book of Light* we could instruct you no more. What falls between the two of you is your own concern. But the Hame is shattered. We cannot continue to watch what you do. So you must leave us and finish out what you have so ill begun alone."

"Alone?" Selna asked. For the first time her voice quivered. She had not been alone for as long as she could remember. She clutched baby Jenna to her.

"You have thrust your own dark sister from you," said the priestess. "You have shamed us all. The child stays here."

"No!" Selna cried, turning. By her side, the gray shadow that was Marjo turned, too. But they ran into a wall of six warriors who pinned

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them against the wall and took the babe, despite Selna's screams and pleading.

They took Selna out into the bright day which meant she would be truly alone at the start of her journey, with only the clothes she wore. Her bow, sword, and gutting knife they threw after her, tied in a heavy bag that took her near an hour to unknot. They said nothing to her, not even a word of farewell, for so the priestess had instructed them.

She left Alta's-Hame by day, but she returned that night, a shadow among shadows, and stole away the child.

There were no guards by the infant's cot. Selna knew there would be none. The women of the Hame would be sure she would never return, so shamed and low had they left her. They would trust in the guards of the outer gates. But she was a warrior, the best of them, and often she and Marjo had played among the secret passageways. So silently, Selna stole back in, more quietly even than a shadow. She doused three lights along the hallways before Marjo's pale voice could alert the sleepers.

Jenna woke and recognized her foster mother's smell. Giving a satisfied sound, she fell asleep again. It was that small wisp of sound that confirmed Selna's determination. She raced down the secret ways and was at the forest's edge before it was dawn.

As she slipped along the old paths where the rocks were worn smooth by the passage of so many feet, the birds heralded her arrival. She found the large boulder off to the side of the path where she had left her weapons. Shamed as she was, she would still not have raised her sword or bow against her Hame mates. Leaning back against the rock, into a niche that seemed to exactly fit her body, she slipped her tunic down to her waist. Now that she was truly the child's mother, she could nurse it as well. She gave the baby her breast. For a few moments Jenna sucked eagerly, but when no milk came, she turned her head to the side and wailed.

"Hush!" Selna said, sharply, taking the child's face between her fingers and squeezing. "A warrior must be silent."

But the baby, hungry and frightened, cried even more.

Selna shook the infant roughly, unaware that tears were coursing down her own cheeks. Startled, the child stopped crying. Then Selna stood up and looked around, making sure no one had been alerted by the child's cries. When she heard nothing, she sat back down, leaned against the rock, and slept, the baby in her arms.

But Jenna did not sleep. Restless and hungry, she caught at dust motes in the rays of the sun that filtered through the canopy of aspen and birch. At last she put her tiny hand into her mouth and sucked noisily.

* * *

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It was hours before Selna awoke and when she did the sun was already high overhead and a fox was puzzling on the edge of the small clearing, its sharp little muzzle poking into the undergrowth. At Selna's waking, it looked up, ears stiff with warning, then turned abruptly and disappeared into the shadows.

Selna stretched, and looked at the babe sleeping on her lap. She smiled, touching Jenna's white hair. In the sunlight she could see the infant's pink scalp under the fine hair and the beating of the pulse beneath the shield of skin.

"You are mine," she whispered fiercely. "I shall care for you. I shall protect you. I shall feed you. I—and no others."

At her voice Jenna awoke and her cry was cranky and thin.

"You are hungry. So am I," Selna said quietly. "I shall find us both something to eat."

She pulled her tunic down, and bound the child to her back, slipping the ribbands under her own arms, tight enough so that the child was safe, loose enough so that they both could move. Holding her bow and sword in her left hand, she slipped the gutting knife into its sheath over her right shoulder where she could reach it for a fast throw. Then she began loping down the forest paths.

She was lucky. She found tracks of a small rabbit, stalked it easily, and brought it down with a light arrow at the first try. Fearing to make a large fire still so close to Alta's-Hame, she nevertheless knew better than to eat a rabbit raw. So she dug a deep hole and made a small fire there, enough to at least sear the meat. She chewed it, then spit the juices into Jenna's mouth. After the second try, the babe did not refuse the offering and sucked it up eagerly, mouth to mouth.

"As soon as I can, I will find you milk," Selna promised, wiping the baby's mouth and then tickling her under the chin. "I will hire out to guard one of the small border towns. Or I will find the High King's army. They like Alta's warriors. They will not refuse me."

Jenna smiled her response, her little hands waving about in the air. Selna kissed her on the brow, feeling the brush of the child's white hair under her nose, as soft as the wing of a butterfly. Then she bound the baby on her back again.

"We have many more miles to go tonight before I will feel safe," Selna said. She did not add that she wanted to stay the night in the forest because the full moon was due and she could not bear to speak to her pale shadow and explain all that she had done.

The Legend:

In the dark forest near Altashame there is a clearing. Under a stand of white birch grows a red-tipped iris. The people who live in Selkirk, on

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the west side of the forest, say that three ghosts may be seen on the second moon of each year. One is a warrior woman, a dark necklace at her throat. The second is her shadowy twin. And the third is a snow white bird that flies above them crying with a child's voice. At dawn the two women strike one another with their swords. Where their blood falls the iris spring up, as white as the bird, as red as the blood. "Snow-iris" the folk of the East call the flower. "Cold Heart" say the folk from the South. But "Sister's Blood" is the Selkirk name and the people of that town leave the flowers alone. Though the juice from the iris heart binds up a woman in her time of troubles and gives her relief from flashes of heat, the Selkirk folk will not touch so much as a leaf of the flower, and they will not go into the clearing after dark.

The Story:

At the edge of a small clearing, a short run to the outskirts of the town of Seldenkirk, Selna rested. Leaning against a small oak which protected her from the bright full moon, she caught her breath and dropped both bow and sword. Her breathing was so labored at first, she did not hear the noise and then, when she heard it, it was already too late. Strong, callused hands grabbed her from behind and twisted a knife point into the hollow below her chin.

She stopped herself from crying out in pain, and then the knife slipped down and carved a circle of blood like a necklace around her throat.

"These be the only jewels an Alta-slut should own," came the gruff voice behind her. "You be mighty far from your own, my girl."

She fell to her knees, trying to twist and protect the child at her back, and the movement frightened the man who jammed the knife deep in her throat. She tried to scream but no sound came out.

The man laughed raggedly and ripped her tunic down the front, exposing her breasts and belly. "Built like a boy," he said, disgustedly. "Your kind be good only dying or dead." He grabbed her by one leg and pulled her out from the forest onto the softer grass of the moon-lit clearing. Then he tried to turn her from her side onto her back.

She could not scream, but she could still fight him. But another woman screamed from behind, a strange gurgling.

Startled, he looked over his shoulder, saw a twin of the first woman, her own throat banded by a black line of blood. Turning back, he realized his mistake for Selna had managed to get her hand on her knife. With the last remaining strength in her arm, she threw the knife at his face. It hit him cleanly between the eyes. But Selna did not see it for she had already rolled over on her stomach and died, her fingertips touching Marjo's.

The man tried to get to his feet, managed only to his knees, then fell

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on top of Selna, the handle of the knife between his eyes coming to rest in baby Jenna's hand. She held on to it and cried.

They were found in the morning by a shepherd who always took his flock to that clearing where the spring grass was sweetest. He arrived just before sunrise and thought he saw three dead folk by the clearing's edge. When he got to them, pushing his way through his reluctant sheep he saw that there were only two, a woman, her throat cut, and a man, a gutting knife between his eyes. A silent infant was holding on to the bloody knife handle as if she herself had set it on its deadly path.

The shepherd ran all the way back to Seldenkirk forgetting his sheep who bleated around the ghastly remains. When he returned, with six strong ploughboys and the portly high sheriff, only the man lay there, on his back, in a circle of sheep. The dead woman, the babe, the knife, and one of the shepherd's nursing ewes were gone.

The Ballad:

The Ballad of the Selden Babe

Do not go down, ye maidens all,
Who wear the golden gown,
Do not go to the clearing
At the edge of Seldentown,
For wicked are the men who wait
To bring young maidens down.

A maiden went to Seldentown,
A maid no more was she,
Her hair hung loose about her neck,
Her gown aboun her knee,
A babe was slung upon her back,
A bonnie babe was he.

She went into the clearing wild,
She went too far from town,
A man came up behind her
And he cut her neck aroun',
A man came up behind her
And he pushed that fair maid down.

"And will ye have your way wi' me,
Or will ye cut me dead,
Or do ye hope to take from me

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My long lost maidenhead?
Why have ye brought me far from town
Upon this grass green bed?"

He never spoke a single word,
Nor gave to her his name,
Nor whence and where his parentage,
Nor from which town he came,
He only thought to bring her low
And heap her high wi' shame.

But as he set about his plan,
And went about his work,
The babe upon the maiden's back
Had touched her hidden dirk,
And from its sheath had taken it
All in the clearing's mirk.

And one and two, the tiny hands
Did fell the evil man
Who all upon his mother had
Commenced the wicked plan.
God grant us all such bonnie babes
And a good and long life span.

The Story:

The priestess called off the banishment for four of the hunters had found Selna's body hand in hand with Marjo. The hunters had melted quickly back into the forest when the shepherd had appeared, waited out his discovery, then taken Selna, the babe, and the ewe back to Alta's-hame.

"Our sisters are once more with us," the priestess said, and she made Alta's mark—the circle and the crux—on Selna's forehead, when she met the hunters with their sad burden at the great gate. "Bring her in. The child also. She now belongs to us all. No one of us shall mother her alone."

"The prophecy, mother," Amalda cried out, and many echoed her. "Is this the child spoke of?"

The priestess shook her head. "The *Book* speaks of a thrice-orphaned babe and this sweetling has lost but two mothers, her first mother and Selna."

"But Mother," Amalda continued. "Was not Marjo her mother as well?"

The priestess' mouth grew tight. "We may not help a prophecy along,

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sister. Remeber that it is written that *Miracles come to the unsuspecting.* I have spoken. The child will not have one mother here at Alta's-hame hereafter but a multitude." She twisted her long braid through her fingers.

The women murmmured amongst themselves, but at last they agreed she was right. So they set Selna's corpse into the withy burial basket and brought her into the infirmarer's room. There they washed and dressed her body, brushed her hair until it shone, then twined the top withes of the basket closed.

It took six of them, one at each corner of the basket and two at head and foot, to carry the burden up Holy Hill to the great mazed cave, Alta's Rock, where the bodies of generations of sisters lay wrapped and preserved, under blazing torches.

Though they went up to Alta's Rock at noon, they waited until night for the ceremony, eating sparingly of the fruits they had brought with them. They spoke quietly of Selna's life, of her hunting skills and her fearlessness, her quick temper and her quicker smile. And they spoke as often of Marjo, not the pale shadow, but the hearty, laughing companion.

Kadreen remarked that it was Alta's luck that had led them to find Selna's body.

"No, sister, it was the skill of my sisters and me. We trailed her through several nights, and if she had not been out of her mind, we would never have picked up her trail for she was the best of us," said Amalda.

Kadreen shook her head and placed her hand on Amalda's shoulder. "I mean, sister, that it was Alta's gracious gift that we have her body with us at Holy Hill, for how many of our own lie far away in unmarked graves?"

When the moon rose, the group on the Hill was almost doubled, the children alone without dark sisters.

Marjo's body appeared in its own basket by Selna's side, the withy latticework as finely done as her sister's.

Then the priestess, her voice ragged with sorrow; began. "For our sisters who are united even in death," she said, then breaking a moment out of the ritual whispered to the two corpses, "There is nothing wrong between you now."

Donya drew a loud, groaning breath, and the two kitchen maids burst into tears.

The priestess sang the first of the Seven praises, wtih the others quickly joining in, singing the parts they had known from childhood.

In the name of Alta's cave,
The dark and lonely grave . . .

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When the seventh was done, and only the last lovely echo lingered in the air, they picked up the baskets and carried Selna and Marjo into the cave.

Donya and her dark sister were the last, Donya carrying the white-haired babe who was so full of ewe's milk, she slept peacefully on the kitchener's ample breast.

The Myth:

Then Great Alta said, "There shall be one of you, my only daughter, who shall be thrice born and thrice orphaned. She shall lie by a dead mother's side three times yet shall herself live. She shall be queen above all things yet queen she will not be. She shall carry a babe in her womb for each mother, yet mother them not. The three shall be as one and begin the world anew. So I say and so shall it be."

And then Great Alta picked out of the light a weeping child as white as snow, as red as blood, as black as night, and suckled her until the child was still. ●

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by Charles Sheffield

TRAPLANDA

The author's last appearance in this magazine was with "Tunicate, Tunicate, Wilt Thou Be Mine" (June 1985), and his most recent book is *The Nimrod Hunt* (Baen Books, 1986). He is the immediate past-president of the Science Fiction Writers of America, and in his alternate universe he is a theoretical physicist, Chief Scientist of Earth Satellite Corporation, and past-president of the American Astronautical Society.

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John Kenyon Martindale seldom did things the usual way. Until a first-class return air ticket and a check for $10,000 arrived at my home in Lausanne I did not know he existed. The enclosed note said only: "For consulting services of Klaus Jacobi in New York, June 6–7." It was typed on his letterhead and initialed, JKM. The check was drawn on the Riggs Bank of Washington, D.C. The tickets were for Geneva–New York on June 5, with an open return.

I did not need work. I did not need money. I had no particular interest in New York, and a trans-Atlantic telephone call to John Kenyon Martindale revealed only that he was out of town until June 5. Why would I bother with him? It is easy to forget what killed the cat.

The limousine that met me at Kennedy Airport drove to a stone mansion on the East River, with a garden that went right down to the water's edge. An old woman with the nose, chin, and hairy moles of a storybook witch opened the door. She took me upstairs to the fourth floor, while my baggage disappeared under the house with the limousine. The mansion was amazingly quiet. The elevator made no noise at all, and when we stepped out of it the deeply carpeted floors of the corridor were matched by walls thick with oriental tapestries. I was not used to so much silence. When I was ushered into a long, shadowed conservatory filled with flowering plants and found myself in the presence of a man and woman, I wanted to shout. Instead I stared.

Shirley Martindale was a brunette, with black hair, thick eyebrows, and a flawless, creamy skin. She was no more than five feet three, but full-figured and strongly built. In normal company she would have been a center of attention; with John Kenyon Martindale present, she was ignored.

He was of medium height and slender build, with a wide, smiling mouth. His hair was thin and wheat-colored, combed straight back from his face. Any other expression he might have had was invisible. From an inch below his eyes to two inches above them, a flat, black shield extended across his whole face. Within that curved strip of darkness colored shadows moved, little darting points and glints of light that flared red and green and electric blue. They were hypnotic, moving in patterns that could be followed but never quite predicted, and they drew and held the attention. They were so striking that it took me a few moments to realize that John Kenyon Martindale must be blind.

He did not act like a person without sight. When I came into the room he at once came forward and confidently shook my hand. His grip was firm, and surprisingly strong for so slight a man.

"A long trip," he said, when the introductions were complete. "May I offer a little refreshment?"

Although the witch was still standing in the room, waiting, he mixed

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the drinks himself, cracking ice, selecting bottles, and pouring the correct measures slowly but without error. When he handed a glass to me and smilingly said "There! How's that?" I glanced at Shirley Martindale and replied, "It's fine; but before we start the toasts I'd like to learn what we are toasting. Why am I here?"

"No messing about, eh? You are very direct. Very Swiss—even though you are not one." He turned his head to his wife, and the little lights twinkled behind the black mask. "What did I tell you, Shirley? This is the man." And then to me. "You are here to make a million dollars. Is that enough reason?"

"No. Mr. Martindale, it is not. It was not money that brought me here. I have enough money."

"Then perhaps you are here to become a Swiss citizen. Is that a better offer?"

"Yes. If you can pay in advance." Already I had an idea what John Martindale wanted of me. I am not psychic, but I can read and see. The inner wall of the conservatory was papered with maps of South America.

"Let us say, I will pay half in advance. You will receive five hundred thousand dollars in your account before we leave. The remainder, and the Swiss citizenship papers, will be waiting when we return from Patagonia."

"We? Who are 'we'?"

"You and I. Other guides if you need them. We will be going through difficult country, though I understand that you know it better than anyone."

I looked at Shirley Martindale, and she shook her head decisively. "Not me, Klaus. Not for one million dollars, not for ten million dollars. This is all John's baby."

"Then my answer must be no." I sipped the best pisco sour I had tasted since I was last in Peru, and wondered where he had learned the technique. "Mr. Martindale, I retired four years ago to Switzerland. Since then I have not set foot in Argentina, even though I still carry those citizenship papers. If you want someone to lead you through the *echter Rand* of Patagonia, there must now be a dozen others more qualified than I. But that is beside the point. Even when I was in my best condition, even when I was so young and cocky that I thought nothing could kill me or touch me—even then I would have refused to lead a blind man to the high places that you display on your walls. With your wife's presence and her assistance to you for personal matters, it might barely be possible. Without her—have you any idea at all what conditions are like there?"

"Better than most people." He leaned forward. "Mr. Jacobi, let us perform a little test. Take something from your pocket, and hold it up in front of you. Something that should be completely unfamiliar to me."

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I hate games, and this smacked of one; but there was something infinitely persuasive about that thin, smiling man. What did I have in my pocket? I reached in, felt my wallet, and slipped out a photograph. I did not look at it, and I was not sure myself what I had selected. I held it between thumb and forefinger, a few feet away from Martindale's intent face.

"Hold it very steady," he said. Then, while the points of light twinkled and shivered, "It is a picture, a photograph of a woman. It is your assistant, Helga Korein. Correct?"

I turned it to me. It was a portrait of Helga, smiling into the camera. "You apparently know far more about me than I know of you. However, you are not quite correct. It is a picture of my wife, Helga Jacobi. I married her four years ago, when I retired. You are not blind?"

"Legally, I am completely blind and have been since my twenty-second year, when I was foolish enough to drive a racing car into a retaining wall." Martindale tapped the black shield. "Without this, I can see nothing. With it, I am neither blind nor seeing. I receive charge-coupled diode inputs directly to my optic nerves, and I interpret them. I see neither at the wavelengths nor with the resolution provided by the human eye, nor is what I reconstruct anything like the images that I remember from the time before I became blind; but I see. On another occasion I will be happy to tell you all that I know about the technology. What you need to know tonight is that I will be able to pull my own weight on any journey. I can give you that assurance. And now I ask again: will you do it?"

It was, of course, curiosity that killed the cat. Martindale had given me almost no information as to where he wanted to go, or when, or why. But something was driving John Martindale, and I wanted to hear what it was.

I nodded my head, convinced now that he would see my movement. "We certainly need to talk in detail; but for the moment let us use that fine old legal phrase, and say there is agreement in principle."

There is agreement in principle. With that sentence, I destroyed my life.

Shirley Martindale came to my room that night. I was not surprised. John Martindale's surrogate vision was a miracle of technology, but it had certain limitations. The device could not resolve the fleeting look in a woman's eye, or the millimeter jut to a lower lip. I had caught the signal in the first minute.

We did not speak until it was done and we were lying side by side in my bed. I knew it was not finished. She had not relaxed against me. I waited. "There is more than he told you," she said at last.

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I nodded. "There is always more. But he was quite right about that place. I have felt it myself, many times."

As South America narrows from the great equatorial swell of the Amazon Basin, the land becomes colder and more broken. The great spine of the Andean cordillera loses height as one travels south. Ranges that tower to twenty-three thousand feet in the tropics dwindle to a modest twelve thousand. The land is shared between Argentina and Chile, and along their border, beginning with the chill depths of Lago Buenos Aires (sixty miles long, ten miles wide; bigger than anything in Switzerland), a great chain of mountain lakes straddles the frontier, all the way south to Tierra del Fuego and the flowering Chilean city of Puntas Arenas.

For fourteen years, the Argentina-Chile borderland between latitude 46 and 50 South had been my home, roughly from Lago Buenos Aires to Lago Argentina. It had become closer to me than any human, closer even than Helga. The east side of the Andes in this region is a bitter, parched desert, where gale-force winds blow incessantly three hundred and sixty days of the year. They come from the snow-bound slopes of the mountains, freezing whatever they touch. I knew the country and I loved it, but Helga had persuaded me that it was not a land to which a man could retire. The buffeting wind was an endless drain, too much for old blood. Better, she said, to leave in early middle age, when a life elsewhere could still be shaped.

When the time came for us to board the aircraft that would take me away to Buenos Aires and then to Europe, I wanted to throw away my ticket. I am not a sentimental man, but only Helga's presence allowed me to leave the Kingdom of the Winds.

Now John Martindale was tempting me to return there, with more than money. At one end of his conservatory-study stood a massive globe, about six feet across. Presumably it dated from the time before he had acquired his artificial eyes, because it differed from all other globes I had ever seen in one important respect; namely, it was a relief globe. Oceans were all smooth surface, while mountain ranges of the world stood out from the surface of the flattened sphere. The degree of relief had been exaggerated, but everything was in proportion. Himalayan and Karakoram ranges projected a few tenths of an inch more than the Rockies and the Andes, and they in turn were a little higher than the Alps or the volcanic ranges of Indonesia.

When my drink was finished Martindale had walked me across to that globe. He ran his finger down the backbone of the Americas, following the continuous mountain chains from their beginning in Alaska, through the American Rockies, through Central America, and on to the rising Andes and northern Chile. When he finally came to Patagonia his fingers slowed and stopped.

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"Here," he said. "It begins here."

His fingertip was resting on an area very familiar to me. It was right on the Argentina–Chile border, with another of the cold mountain lakes at the center of it. I knew the lake as Lago Pueyrredon, but as usual with bodies of water that straddle the border there was a different name—Lago Cochrane—in use on the Chilean side. The little town of Paso Roballo, where I had spent a dozen nights in a dozen years, lay just to the northeast.

If I closed my eyes I could see the whole landscape that lay beneath his finger. To the east it was dry and dusty, sustaining only thornbush and tough grasses on the dark surface of old volcanic flows; westward were the tall flowering grasses and the thicketed forests of redwood, cypress, and Antarctic beech. Even in the springtime of late November there would be snow on the higher ground, with snow-fed lake waters lying black as jet under a Prussian-blue sky.

I could see all this, but it seemed impossible that John Martindale could do so. His blind skull must hold a different vision.

"*What* begins here?" I asked, and wondered again how much he could receive through those arrays of inorganic crystal.

"The anomalies. This region has weather patterns that defy all logic and all models."

"I agree with that, from personal experience. That area has the most curious pattern of winds of any place in the world." It had been a long flight and a long day, and by this time I was feeling a little weary. I was ready to defer discussion of the weather until tomorrow, and I wanted time to reflect on our "agreement in principle." I continued, "However, I do not see why those winds should interest you."

"I am a meteorologist. Now wait a moment." His sensor array must have caught something of my expression. "Do not jump to a wrong conclusion. Mine was a perfect profession for a blind man. Who can see the weather? I was ten times as sensitive as a sighted person to winds, to warmth, to changes in humidity and barometric pressure. What I could not see was cloud formations, and those are consequences rather than causes. I could deduce their appearance from other variables. Eight years ago I began to develop my own computer models of weather patterns, analyzing the interaction of snow, winds, and topography. Five years ago I believed that my method was completely general, and completely accurate. Then I studied the Andean system; and in one area—only one—it failed." He tapped the globe. "Here. Here there are winds with no sustaining source of energy. I can define a circulation pattern and locate a vortex, but I cannot account for its existence."

"The area you show is known locally as the Kingdom of the Winds."

"I know. I want to go there."

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And so did I.

When he spoke I felt a great longing to return, to see again the *altiplano* of the eastern Andean slopes and hear the banshee music of the western wind. It was all behind me. I had sworn to myself that Argentina existed only in my past, that the Patagonian spell was broken forever. John Martindale was giving me a million dollars and Swiss citizenship, but more than that he was giving me an *excuse*. For four years I had been unconsciously searching for one.

I held out my glass. "I think, Mr. Martindale, that I would like another drink."

Or two. Or three.

Shirley Martindale was moving by my side now, running her hand restlessly along my arm. "There is more. He wants to understand the winds, but there is more. He hopes to find Trapalanda."

She did not ask me if I had heard of it. No one who spends more than a week in central Patagonia can be ignorant of Trapalanda. For three hundred years, explorers have searched for the "City of the Caesars," *Trapalanda*, the Patagonian version of El Dorado. Rumor and speculation said that Trapalanda would be found at about 47 degrees South, at the same latitude as Paso Roballo. Its fabled treasure-houses of gold and gemstones had drawn hundreds of men to their death in the high Andes. People did not come back, and say, "I sought Trapalanda, and I failed to find it." They did not come back at all. I was an exception.

"I am disappointed," I said. "I had thought your husband to be a wiser man."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone wants to find Trapalanda. Four years of my life went into the search for it, and I had the best equipment and the best knowledge. I told your husband that there were a dozen better guides, but I was lying. I know that country better than any man alive. He is certain to fail."

"He believes that he has special knowledge. And you are going to do it. You are going to take him there. For Trapalanda."

She knew better than I. Until she spoke, I did not know what I would do. But she was right. Forget the "agreement in principle." I would go.

"You want me to do it, don't you?" I said. "But I do not understand *your* reasons. You are married to a very wealthy man. He seems to have as much money as he can ever spend."

"John is curious, always curious. He is like a little boy. He is not doing this for money. He does not care about money."

She had not answered my implied question. I had never asked for John Kenyon Martindale's motives, I had been looking for *her* reasons why he should go. Then it occurred to me that her presence, here in my bed,

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told me all I needed to know. He would go to the Kingdom of the Winds. If he found what he was looking for, it would bring enormous wealth. Should he fail to return, Shirley Martindale would be a free and very wealthy widow.

"Sex with your husband is not good?" I asked.

"What do you think? I am here, am I not?" Then she relented. "It is worse than not good, it is terrible. It is as bad with him as it is exciting with you. John is a gentle, thoughtful man, but I need someone who takes me and does not ask or explain. You are a strong man, and I suspect that you are a cold, selfish man. Since we have been together, you have not once spoken my name, or said a single word of affection. You do not feel it is necessary to pretend to commitments. And you are sexist. I noticed John's reaction when you said, 'I married Helga.' He would always say it differently, perhaps 'Shirley and I got married.' " Her hands moved from my arm, and were touching me more intimately. She sighed. "I do not mind your attitude. What John finds hard to stand, I *need*. You saw what you did to me here, without one word. You make me shiver."

I turned to bring our bodies into full contact. "And John?" I said. "Why did he marry you?" There was no need to ask why she had married him.

"What do you think," she said. "Was it my wit, my looks, my charm? Give me your hand." She gently moved my fingers along her face and breasts. "It was five years ago. John was still blind. We met, and when we said goodnight he felt my cheek." Her voice was bitter. "He married me for my pelt."

The texture was astonishing. I could feel no roughness, no blemish, not even the most delicate of hairs. Shirley Martindale had the warm, flawless skin of a six-month-old baby. It was growing warm under my touch.

Before we began she raised herself high above me, propping herself on straight arms. "Helga. What is she like? I cannot imagine her."

"You will see," I said. "Tomorrow I will telephone Lausanne and tell her to come to New York. She will go with us to Trapalanda."

Trapalanda. Had I said that? I was very tired, I had meant to say Patagonia.

I reached up to touch her breasts. "No talk now," I said. "No more talk." Her eyes were as black as jet, as dark as mountain lakes. I dived into their depths.

Shirley Martindale did not meet Helga; not in New York, not anywhere, not ever. John Kenyon Martindale made his position clear to me the next morning as we walked together around the seventh floor library. "I won't allow her to stay in this house," he said. "It's not for my sake

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or yours, and certainly not for Shirley's. It is for her sake. I know how Shirley would treat her."

He did not seem at all annoyed, but I stared at the blind black mask and revised my ideas about how much he could see with his CCD's and fiber optic bundles.

"Did she tell you last night why I am going to Patagonia?" he asked, as he picked out a book and placed it in the hopper of an iron pot-bellied stove with electronic aspirations.

I hesitated, and told the truth. "She said you were seeking Trapalanda."

He laughed. "I wanted to go to Patagonia. The easiest way to do it without an argument from Shirley was to hold out a fifty billion dollar bait. The odd thing, though, is that she is quite right. I am seeking Trapalanda." And he laughed again, more heartily than anything he had said would justify.

The black machine in front of us made a little purr of contentment, and a pleasant woman's voice began to read aloud. It was a mathematics text on the foundations of geometry. I had noticed that although Martindale described himself as a meteorologist, four-fifths of the books in the library were mathematics and theoretical physics. There were too many things about John Martindale that were not what they seemed.

"Shirley's voice," he said, while we stood by the machine and listened to a mystifying definition of the intrinsic curvature of a surface. "And a very pleasant voice, don't you think, to have whispering sweet epsilons in your ear? I borrowed it for use with this optical character recognition equipment, before I got my eyes."

"I didn't think there was a machine in the world that could do that."

"Oh, yes." He switched it off, and Shirley halted in mid-word. "This isn't even state-of-the-art any more. It was, when it was made, and it cost the earth. Next year it will be an antique, and they'll give this much capability out in cereal packets. Come on, let's go and join Shirley for a pre-lunch aperitif."

If John Martindale were angry with me or with his wife, he concealed it well. I realized that the mask extended well beyond the black casing.

Five days later we flew to Argentina. When Martindale mentioned his idea of being in the Kingdom of the Winds in time for the winter solstice, season of the anomaly's strongest showing, I dropped any thoughts of a trip back to Lausanne. I arranged for Helga to pack what I needed and meet us in Buenos Aires. She would wait at Ezeiza Airport without going into the city proper, and we would fly farther south at once. Even if our travels went well, we would need luck as well as efficiency to have a week near Paso Roballo before solstice.

It amused me to see Martindale searching for Helga in the airport arrival lounge as we walked off the plane. He had seen her photograph,

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and I had assured him that she would be there. He could not find her. Within seconds, long before it was possible to see her features, I had picked her out. She was staring down at a book on her lap. Every fifteen seconds her head lifted for a rapid radar-like scan of the passenger lounge, and returned to the page. Martindale did not notice her until we were at her side.

I introduced them. Helga nodded but did not speak. She stood up and led the way. She had rented a four-seater plane on open charter, and in her usual efficient way she had arranged for our luggage to be transferred to it.

Customs clearance, you ask? Let us be realistic. The Customs Office in Argentina is no more corrupt than that of, say, Bolivia or Ecuador; that is quite sufficient. Should John Martindale be successful in divining the legendary treasures of Trapalanda, plenty of hands would help to remove them illegally from the country.

Helga led the way through the airport. She was apparently not what he had expected of my wife, and I could see him studying her closely. Helga stood no more than five feet two, to my six-two, and her thin body was not quite straight. Her left shoulder dipped a bit, and she favored her left leg a trifle as she walked.

Since I was the only one with a pilot's license I sat forward in the co-pilot's chair, next to Owen Davies. I had used Owen before as a by-the-day hired pilot. He knew the Kingdom of the Winds, and he respected it. He would not take risks. In spite of his name he was Argentina born—one of the many Welshmen who found almost any job preferable to their parents' Argentinian sheep-farming. Martindale and Helga sat behind us, side-by-side in the back, as we flew to Comodoro Rivadavia on the Atlantic coast. It was the last real airfield we would see for a while unless we dipped across the Chilean border to Cochrane. I preferred not to try that. In the old days, you risked a few machine-gun bullets from frontier posts. Today it is likely to be a surface-to-air missile.

We would complete our supplies in Comodoro Rivadavia, then use dry dirt airstrips the rest of the way. The provisions were supposed to be waiting for us. While Helga and Owen were checking to make sure that the delivery included everything we had ordered, Martindale came up to my side.

"Does she never talk?" he said. "Or is it just my lack of charm?" He did not sound annoyed, merely puzzled.

"Give her time." I looked to see what Owen and Helga were doing. They were pointing at three open chests of supplies, and Owen was becoming rather loud.

"You noticed how Helga walks, and how she holds her left arm?"

The black shield dipped down and up, making me suddenly curious as

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to what lay behind it. "I even tried to hint at a question in that direction," he said. "Quite properly she ignored it."

"She was not born that way. When Helga walked into my office nine years ago, I assumed that I was looking at some congenital condition. She said nothing, nor did I. I was looking for an assistant, someone who was as interested in the high border country as I was, and Helga fitted. She was only twenty-one years old and still green, but I could tell she was intelligent and trainable."

"Biddable," said Martindale. "Sorry, go on."

"You have to be fit to wander around in freezing temperatures at ten thousand feet," I said. "As part of Helga's condition of employment, she had to take a full physical. She didn't want to. She agreed only when she saw that the job depended on it. She was in excellent shape and passed easily; but the doctor—quite improperly—allowed me to look at her X-rays."

Were the eyebrows raised, behind that obsidian visor? Martindale cocked his head to the right, a small gesture of inquiry. Helga and Owen Davies were walking our way.

"She was put together like a jigsaw puzzle. Almost every bone in her arms and legs showed marks of fracture and healing. Her ribs, too. When she was small she had been what these enlightened times call 'abused.' Tortured. As a very small child, Helga learned to keep quiet. The best thing she could hope for was to be ignored. You saw already how invisible she can be."

"I have never heard you angry before," he said. "You sound like her father, not her husband." His tone was calm, but something new hid behind that mask. "And is that," he continued, "why in New York—"

He was interrupted. "Tomorrow," said Owen from behind him. "He says he'll have the rest then. I believe him. I told him he's a fat idle bastard, and if we weren't on our way by noon I'd personally kick the shit out of him."

Martindale nodded at me. Conversation closed. We headed into town for Alberto McShane's bar and the uncertain pleasures of nightlife in Comodoro Rivadavia. Martindale didn't give up. All the way there he talked quietly to Helga. He may have received ten words in return.

It had been five years. Alberto McShane didn't blink when we walked in. He took my order without comment, but when Helga walked past him he reached out his good arm and gave her a big hug. She smiled like the sun. She was home. She had hung around the *Guanaco* bar since she was twelve years old, an oil brat brought here in the boom years. When her parents left, she stayed. She hid among the beer barrels in McShane's cellar until the plane took off. Then she could relax for the first time in

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her life. Poverty and hard work were luxury after what she had been through.

The decor of the bar hadn't changed since last time. The bottle of dirty black oil (the first one pumped at Comodoro Rivadavia, if you believe McShane) hung over the bar, and the same stuffed guanaco and rhea stood beside it. McShane's pet armadillo, or its grandson, ambled among the tables looking for beer heel-taps.

I knew our search plans, but Helga and Owen Davies needed briefing. Martindale took Owen's 1:1,000,000 scale ONC's, with their emendations and local detail in Owen's careful hand, added to them the 1:250,000 color photomaps that had been made for him in the United States, and spread the collection out to cover the whole table.

"From here, to here," he said. His fingers tapped the map near Laguna del Sello, then moved south and west until they reached Lago Belgrano.

Owen studied them for a few moments. "All on this side of the border," he said. "That's good. What do you want to do there?"

"I want to land. Here, and here, and here." Martindale indicated seven points, on a roughly north-south line.

Owen Davies squinted down, assessing each location. "Lago Gio, Paso Roballo, Lago Posadas. Know 'em all. Tough landing at two, and that last point is in the middle of the Perito Moreno National Park; but we can find a place." He looked up, not at Martindale but at me. "You're not in the true high country, though. You're twenty miles too far east. What do you want to do when you get there?"

"I want to get out, and look west," said Martindale. "After that, I'll tell you where we have to go."

Owen Davies said nothing more, but when we were at the bar picking up more drinks he gave me a shrug. *Too far east,* it said. *You're not in the high country. You won't find Trapalanda there, where he's proposing to land. What's the story?*

Owen was an honest man and a great pilot, who had made his own failed attempt at Trapalanda (sometimes I thought that was true of everyone who lived below 46 degrees South). He found it hard to believe that anyone could succeed where he had not, but he couldn't resist the lure.

"He knows something he's not telling us," I said. "He's keeping information to himself. Wouldn't you?"

Owen nodded. Barrels of star rubies and tons of platinum and gold bars shone in his dark Welsh eyes.

When we returned to the table John Martindale had made his breakthrough. Helga was talking and bubbling with laughter. "How did you *do* that," she was saying. "He's untouchable. What did you *do* to him?" McShane's armadillo was sitting on top of the table, chewing happily at

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a piece of apple. Martindale was rubbing the ruffle of horny plates behind its neck, and the armadillo was pushing itself against his hand.

"He thinks I'm one of them." Martindale touched the black screen across his eyes. "See? We've both got plates. I'm just one of the family." His face turned up to me. I read satisfaction behind the mask. *And should I do to your wife, Klaus, what you did to mine?* it said. *It would be no more than justice.*

Those were not Martindale's thoughts. I realized that. They were mine. And that was the moment when my liking for John Kenyon Martindale began to tilt toward resentment.

At ground level, the western winds skim off the Andean slopes at seventy knots or more. At nine thousand feet, they blow at less than thirty. Owen was an economy-minded pilot. He flew west at ten thousand until we were at the preferred landing point, then dropped us to the ground in three sickening sideslips.

He had his landing already planned. Most of Patagonia is built of great level slabs, rising like terraces from the high coastal cliffs on the Atlantic Ocean to the Andean heights in the west. The exception was in the area we were exploring. Volcanic eruptions there have pushed great layers of basalt out onto the surface. The ground is cracked and irregular, and scarred by the scouring of endless winds. It takes special skill to land a plane when the wind speed exceeds the landing air-speed, and Owen Davies had it. We showed an airspeed of over a hundred knots when we touched down, light as a dust mote, and rolled to a perfect landing. "Good enough," said Owen.

He had brought us down on a flat strip of dark lava, at three o'clock in the afternoon. The sun hung low on the northwest horizon, and we stepped out into the teeth of a cold and dust-filled gale. The wind beat and tugged and pushed our bodies, trying to blow us back to the Atlantic. Owen, Helga, and I wore goggles and helmets against the driving clouds of grit and sand.

Martindale was bare-headed. He planted a GPS transponder on the ground to confirm our exact position, and faced west. With his head tilted upward and his straw-colored hair blowing wild, he made an adjustment to the side of his visor, then nodded. "It is there," he said. "I knew it must be."

We looked, and saw nothing. "What is there?" said Helga.

"I'll tell you in a moment. Note these down. I'm going to read off heights and headings." Martindale looked at the sun and the compass. He began to turn slowly from north to south. Every fifteen degrees he stopped, stared at the featureless sky, and read off a list of numbers. When he was finished he nodded to Owen. "All right. We can do the next one now."

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"You mean that's *it*? *The whole thing*? All you're going to do is stand there?" Owen is many good things, but he is not diplomatic.

"That's it—for the moment." Martindale led the way back to the aircraft.

I could not follow. Not at once. I had lifted my goggles and was peering with wind-teared eyes to the west. The land there fell upward to the dark-blue twilight sky. It was the surge of the Andes, less than twenty miles away, rolling up in long, snow-capped breakers. I walked across the tufts of bunch grass and reached out a hand to steady myself on an isolated ten-foot beech tree. Wind-shaped and stunted it stood, trunk and branches curved to the east, hiding its head from the deadly western wind. It was the only one within sight.

This was my Patagonia, the true, the terrible.

I felt a gentle touch on my arm. Helga stood there, waiting. I patted her hand in reply, and she instinctively recoiled. Together we followed Martindale and Davies back to the aircraft.

"I found what I was looking for," Martindale said, when we were all safely inside. The gale buffeted and rocked the craft, resenting our presence. "It's no secret now. When the winds approach the Andes from the Chilean side, they shed all the moisture they have picked up over the Pacific; and they accelerate. The energy balance equation is the same everywhere in the world. It depends on terrain, moisture, heating, and atmospheric layers. The same equation everywhere—except that *here*, in the Kingdom of the Winds, something goes wrong. The winds pick up so much speed that they are thermodynamically impossible. There is a mechanism at work, pumping energy into the moving air. I knew it before I left New York City; and I knew what it must be. There had to be a long, horizontal line-vortex, running north to south and transmitting energy to the western wind. But that too was impossible. First, then, I had to confirm that the vortex existed." He nodded vigorously. "It does. With my vision sensors I can see the patterns of compression and rarefaction. In other words, I can see direct evidence of the vortex. With half a dozen more readings, I will pinpoint the exact origin of its energy source."

"But what's all that got to do with finding . . . " Owen trailed off and looked at me guiltily. I had told him what Martindale was after, but I had also cautioned him never to mention it.

"With finding Trapalanda?" finished Martindale. "Why, it has everything to do with it. There must be one site, a specific place where the generator exists to power the vortex line. Find that, and we will have found Trapalanda."

Like God, Duty, or Paradise, Trapalanda means different things to different people. I could see from the expression on Owen's face that a

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line-vortex power generator was not *his* Trapalanda, no matter what it meant to Martindale.

I had allowed six days; it took three. On the evening of June 17, we sat around the tiny table in the aircraft's rear cabin. There would be no flying tomorrow, and Owen had produced a bottle of *usquebaugh australis*; "southern whiskey," the worst drink in the world.

"On foot," John Martindale was saying. "Now it has to be on foot—and just in case, one of us will stay at the camp in radio contact."

"Helga," I said. She and Martindale shook heads in unison. "Suppose you have to carry somebody out?" she said. "I can't do that. It must be you or Owen."

At least she was taking this seriously, which Owen Davies was not. He had watched with increasing disgust while Martindale made atmospheric observations at seven sites. Afterward he came to me secretly. "We're working for a madman," he said. "We'll find no treasure. I'd almost rather work for Diego."

Diego Luria—"Mad Diego"—believed that the location of Trapalanda could be found by a correct interpretation of the Gospel According to Saint John. He had made five expeditions to the altiplano, four of them with Owen as pilot. It was harder on Owen than you might think, since Diego sometimes said that human sacrifice would be needed before Trapalanda could be discovered. They had found nothing; but they had come back, and that in itself was no mean feat.

Martindale had done his own exact triangulation, and pinpointed a place on the map. He had calculated UTM coordinates accurate to within twenty meters. They were not promising. When we flew as close as possible to his chosen location we found that we were looking at a point halfway up a steep rock face, where a set of broken waterfalls cascaded down a near-vertical cliff.

"I am sure," he said, in reply to my implied question. "The data-fit residuals are too small to leave any doubt." He tapped the map, and looked out of the aircraft window at the distant rock face. "Tomorrow. You, and Helga, and I will go. You, Owen, you stay here and monitor our transmission frequency. If we are off the air for more than twelve hours, come and get us."

He was taking this *too* seriously. Before the light faded I went outside again and trained my binoculars on the rock face. According to Martindale, at that location was a power generator that could modify the flow of winds along two hundred and fifty miles of mountain range. I saw nothing but the blown white spray of falls and cataracts, and a grey highland fox picking its way easily up the vertical rock face.

"Trust me." Martindale had appeared suddenly at my side. "I can *see*

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those wind patterns when I set my sensors to function at the right wavelengths. What's your problem?"

"Size." I turned to him. "Can you make your sensors provide telescopic images?"

"Up to three-inch effective aperture."

"Then take a look up there. You're predicting that we'll find a machine which produces tremendous power—"

"Many gigawatts."

"—more power than a whole power station. And there is nothing there, nothing to see. That's impossible."

"Not at all." The sun was crawling along the northern horizon. The thin daylight lasted for only eight hours, and already it was fading. John Kenyon Martindale peered off westward and shook his head. He tapped his black visor. "You've had a good look at this," he said. "Suppose I had wanted to buy something that could do what this does, say, five years ago. Do you know what it would have weighed?"

"*Weighed*?" I shook my head.

"At least a ton. And ten years ago, it would have been impossible to build, no matter how big you allowed it to be. In another ten years, this assembly will fit easily inside a prosthetic eye. The way is toward miniaturization, higher energy densities, more compact design. I expect the generator to be small." He suddenly turned again to look right into my face. "I have a question for you, and it is an unforgivably personal one. Have you ever consummated your marriage with Helga?"

He had anticipated my lunge at him, and he backed away rapidly. "Do not misunderstand me," he said. "Helga's extreme aversion to physical contact is obvious. If it is total, there are New York specialists who can probably help her. I have influence there."

I looked down at my hands as they held the binoculars. They were trembling. "It is—total," I said.

"You knew that—and yet you married her. Why?"

"Why did you marry *your* wife, knowing you would be cuckolded?" I was lashing out, not expecting an answer.

"Did she tell you it was for her skin?" His voice was weary, and he was turning away as he spoke. "I'm sure she did. Well, I will tell you. I married Shirley—because she wanted me to."

Then I was standing alone in the deepening darkness. Shirley Martindale had warned me, back in New York. He was like a child, curious about everything. Including me, including Helga, including me and Helga.

Damn you, John Martindale. I looked at the bare hillside, and prayed that Trapalanda would somehow swallow him whole. Then I would never

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again have to endure that insidious, probing voice, asking the unanswerable.

The plane had landed on the only level piece of ground in miles. Our destination was a mile and a half away, but it was across some formidable territory. We would have to descend a steep scree, cross a quarter mile of boulders until we came to a fast-moving stream, and follow that watercourse upward, until we were in the middle of the waterfalls themselves.

The plain of boulders showed the translucent sheen of a thin ice coating. The journey could not be done in poor light. We would wait until morning, and leave promptly at ten.

Helga and I went to bed early, leaving Martindale with his calculations and Owen Davies with his *usquebaugh australis*. At a pinch the aircraft would sleep four, but Helga and I slept outside in a small reinforced tent brought along for the purpose. The floor area was five feet by seven. We had pitched the tent in the lee of the aircraft, where the howl of the wind was muted. I listened to Helga's breathing, and knew after half an hour that she was still awake.

"Think we'll find anything?" I said softly.

"I don't know." And then, after maybe one minute. "It's not that. It's you, Klaus."

"I've never been better."

"That's the problem. I've seen you, these last few days. You love it here. I should never have taken you away."

"I'm not complaining."

"That's part of the problem, too. You never complain. I wish you would." I heard her turn to face me in the dark, and for one second I imagined a hand was reaching out towards me. It was an illusion. She went on, "When I said I wanted to leave Patagonia and live in Europe, you agreed without an argument. But your heart has always been here."

"Oh, well, I don't know . . . " The lie stuck in my throat.

"And there's something else. I wasn't going to tell you, because I was afraid that you would misunderstand. But I will tell you. John Martindale tried to touch me."

I stirred, began to sit up, and felt the rough canvas against my forehead. Outside, the wind gave a sudden scream around the tent. "You mean he tried to—to—"

"No. He reached out, and tried to touch the back of my hand. That was all. I don't know why he did it, but I think it was just curiosity. He watches everything, and he has been watching us. I pulled my hand away before he got near. But it made me think of you. I have not been a wife to you, Klaus. You've done your best, and I've tried my hardest

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but it hasn't improved at all. Be honest with yourself, you know it hasn't. So if you want to stay here when this work is finished . . . "

I hated to hear her sound so confused and lost. "Let's not discuss it now," I said.

In other words, I can't bear to talk about it.

We had tried so hard at first, with Helga gritting her teeth at every gentle touch. When I finally realized that the sweat on her forehead and the quiver in her thin limbs was a hundred percent fear and zero percent arousal, I stopped trying. After that we had been happy—or at least, I had. I had not been faithful physically, but I could explain that well enough. And then, with this trip and the arrival on the scene of John Kenyon Martindale, the whole relationship between Helga and me felt threatened. And I did not know why.

"We ought to get as much sleep as we can tonight," I said, after another twenty seconds or so. "Tomorrow will be a tough day."

She said nothing, but she remained awake for a long, long time.

And so, of course, did I.

The first quarter mile was easy, a walk down a gently sloping incline of weathered basalt. Owen Davies had watched us leave with an odd mixture of disdain and greed on his face. We were not going to find anything, he was quite sure of that—but on the other hand, if by some miracle we *did* and he was not there to see it . . .

We carried minimal packs. I thought it would be no more than a two-hour trek to our target point, and we had no intention of being away overnight.

When we came to the field of boulders I revised my estimate. Every square millimeter of surface was coated with the thinnest and most treacherous layer of clear ice. In principle its presence was impossible. With an atmosphere of this temperature and dryness, that ice should have sublimed away.

We picked our way carefully across, concentrating on balance far more than progress. The wind buffeted us, always at the worst moments. It took another hour and a half before we were at the bottom of the waterfalls and could see how to tackle the rock face. It didn't look too bad. There were enough cracks and ledges to make the climb fairly easy.

"That's the spot," said Martindale. "Right in there."

We followed his pointing finger. About seventy feet above our heads one of the bigger waterfalls came cascading its way out from the cliff for a thirty-foot vertical drop.

"The waterfall?" said Helga. Her tone of voice said more than her words. *That's supposed to be a generator of two hundred and fifty miles of gale-force winds?* she was saying. *Tell me another one.*

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"Behind it." Martindale was walking along the base of the cliff, looking for a likely point where he could begin the climb. "The coordinates are actually *inside* the cliff. Which means we have to look *behind* the waterfall. And that means we have to come at it from the side."

We had brought rock-climbing gear with us. We did not need it. Martindale found a diagonal groove that ran at an angle of thirty degrees up the side of the cliff, and after following it to a vertical chimney, we found another slanting ledge running the other way. Two more changes of route, neither difficult, and we were on a ledge about two feet wide that ran up to and right behind our waterfall.

Two feet is a lot less when you are seventy feet up and walking a rock ledge slippery with water. Even here, the winds plucked restlessly at our clothes. We roped ourselves together, Martindale leading, and inched our way forward. When we were a few feet from the waterfall Martindale lengthened the rope between him and me, and went on alone behind the cascading water.

"It's all right." He had to shout to be heard above the crash of water. "It gets easier. The ledge gets wider. It runs into a cave in the face of the cliff. Come on."

We were carrying powerful electric flashlights, and we needed them. Once we were in behind the screen of water, the light paled and dwindled. We shone the lights toward the back of the cave. We were standing on a flat area, maybe ten feet wide and twelve feet deep. So much for Owen's dream of endless caverns of treasure; so much for my dreams, too, though they had been a lot less grandiose than his.

Standing about nine feet in from the edge of the ledge stood a dark blue cylinder, maybe four feet long and as thick as a man's thigh. It was smooth-surfaced and uniform, with no sign of controls or markings on its surface. I heard Martindale grunt in satisfaction.

"Bingo," he said. "That's it."

"The whole thing?"

"Certainly. Remember what I said last night, about advanced technology making this smaller? There's the source of the line-vortex—the power unit for the whole Kingdom of the Winds." He took two steps towards it, and as he did so Helga cried out, "Look out!"

The blank wall at the back of the cave had suddenly changed. Instead of damp grey stone, a rectangle of striated darkness had formed, maybe seven feet high and five feet wide.

Martindale laughed in triumph, and turned back to us. "Don't move for the moment. But don't worry, this is exactly what I hoped we might find. I suspected something like this when I first saw that anomaly. The winds are just an accidental by-product—like an eddy. The equipment

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here must be a little bit off in its tuning. But it's still working, no doubt about that. Feel the inertial dragging?"

I could feel something, a weak but persistent force drawing me toward the dark rectangle. I leaned backward to counteract it and looked more closely at the opening. As my eyes adjusted I realized that it was not true darkness there. Faint blue lines of luminescence started in from the edges of the aperture and flew rapidly toward a vanishing point at the center. There they disappeared, while new blue threads came into being at the outside.

"Where did the opening come from?" said Helga. "It wasn't there when we came in."

"No. It's a portal. I'm sure it only switches on when it senses the right object within range." Martindale took another couple of steps forward. Now he was standing at the very edge of the aperture, staring through at something invisible to me.

"What is it?" I said. In spite of Martindale's words I too had taken a couple of steps closer, and so had Helga.

"A portal—a gate to some other part of the Universe, built around a gravitational line singularity." He laughed, and his voice sounded half an octave lower in pitch. "Somebody left it here for us humans, and it leads to the stars. You wanted Trapalanda? This is it—the most priceless discovery in the history of the human race."

He took one more step forward. His moving leg stretched out forever in front of him, lengthening and lengthening. When his foot came down, the leg looked fifty yards long and it dwindled away to the tiny, distant speck of his foot. He lifted his back foot from the ground, and as he leaned forward his whole body rippled and distorted, stretching away from me. Now he looked his usual self—but he was a hundred yards away, carried with one stride along a tunnel that ran as far as the eye could follow.

Martindale turned, and reached out his hand. A long arm zoomed back towards us, still attached to that distant body, and a normal-sized right hand appeared out of the aperture.

"Come on." The voice was lower again in tone, and strangely slowed. "Both of you. Don't you want to see the rest of the Universe? Here's the best chance that you will ever have."

Helga and I took another step forward, staring in to the very edge of the opening. Martindale reached out his left hand too, and it hurtled toward us, growing rapidly, until it was there to be taken and held. I took another step, and I was within the portal itself. I felt normal, but I was aware of that force again, tugging us harder toward the tunnel. Suddenly I was gripped by an irrational and irresistible fear. I had to get away. I turned to move back from the aperture, and found myself

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looking at Helga. She was thirty yards away, drastically diminished, standing in front of a tiny wall of falling water.

One more step would have taken me outside again to safety, clear of the aperture and its persistent, tugging field. But as I was poised to take that step, Helga acted. She closed her eyes and took a long, trembling step forward. I could see her mouth moving, almost as though in prayer. And then the action I could not believe: she leaned forward to grasp convulsively at John Martindale's outstretched hand.

I heard her gasp, and saw her shiver. Then she was taking another step forward. And another.

"Helga!" I changed my direction and blundered after her along that endless tunnel. "This way. I'll get us out."

"No." She had taken another shivering step, and she was still clutching Martindale's hand. "No, Klaus." Her voice was breathless. "He's right. This is the biggest adventure ever. It's worth everything."

"Don't be afraid," said a hollow, booming voice. It was Martindale, and now all I could see of him was a shimmering silhouette. The man had been replaced by a sparkling outline. "Come on, Klaus. It's almost here."

The tugging force was stronger, pulling on every cell of my body. I looked at Helga, a shining outline now like John Martindale. They were dwindling, vanishing. They were gone. I wearily turned around and tried to walk back the way we had come. Tons of weight hung on me, wreathed themselves around every limb. I was trying to drag the whole world up an endless hill. I forced my legs to take one small step, then another. It was impossible to see if I was making progress. I was surrounded by that roaring silent pattern of rushing blue lines, all going in the opposite direction from me, every one doing its best to drag me back.

I inched along. Finally I could see the white of the waterfall ahead. It was growing in size, but at the same time it was losing definition. My eyes ached. By the time I took the final step and fell on my face on the stone floor of the cave, the waterfall was no more than a milky haze and a sound of rushing water.

Owen Davies saved my life, what there is of it. I did my part to help him. I wanted to live when I woke up, and weak as I was, and half-blind, I managed to crawl down that steep rock face. I was dragging myself over the icy boulders when he found me. My clothes were shredding, falling off my body, and I was shivering and weeping from cold and fear. He wrapped me in his own jacket and helped me back to the aircraft.

Then he went off to look for John Martindale and Helga. He never came back. I do not know to this day if he found and entered the portal, or if he came to grief somewhere on the way.

I spent two days in the aircraft, knowing that I was too sick and my

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eyes were too bad to dream of flying anywhere. My front teeth had all gone, and I ate porridge or biscuits soaked in tea. Three more days, and I began to realize that if I did not fly myself, I was not going anywhere. On the seventh day I managed a faltering, incompetent takeoff and flew northeast, peering at the instruments with my newly purblind eyes. I made a crash landing at Comodoro Rivadavia, was dragged from the wreckage, and flown to a hospital in Bahia Blanca. They did what they could for me, which was not too much. By that time I was beginning to have some faint idea what had happened to my body, and as soon as the hospital was willing to release me I took a flight to Buenos Aires, and on at once to Geneva's Lakeside Hospital. They removed the cataracts from my eyes. Three weeks later I could see again without that filmy mist over everything.

Before I left the hospital I insisted on a complete physical. Thanks to John Martindale's half-million deposit, money was not going to be a problem. The doctor who went over the results with me was about thirty years old, a Viennese Jew who had been practicing for only a couple of years. He looked oddly similar to one of my cousins at that age. "Well, Mr. Jacobi," he said (after a quick look at his dossier to make sure of my name), "there are no organic abnormalities, no cardiovascular problems, only slight circulation problems. You have some osteo-arthritis in your hips and your knees. I'm delighted to be able to tell you that you are in excellent overall health for your age."

"If you didn't know," I said, "how old would you think I am?"

He looked again at his crib sheet, but found no help there. I had deliberately left out my age at the place where the hospital entry form required it. "Well," he said. He was going to humor me. "Seventy-six?"

"Spot on," I said.

I had the feeling that he had knocked a couple of years off his estimate, just to make me feel good. So let's say my biological age was seventy-eight or seventy-nine. When I flew with John Martindale to Buenos Aires, I had been one month short of my forty-fourth birthday.

At that point I flew to New York, and went to John Kenyon Martindale's house. I met with Shirley—briefly. She did not recognize me, and I did not try to identify myself. I gave my name as Owen Davies. In John's absence, I said, I was interested in contacting some of the mathematician friends that he had told me I would like to meet. Could she remember the names of any of them, so I could call them even before John came back? She looked bored, but she came back with a telephone book and produced three names. One was in San Francisco, one was in Boston, and the third was here in New York, at the Courant Institute.

He was in his middle twenties, a fit-looking curly haired man with bright blue eyes and a big smile. The thing that astonished him about

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my visit, I think, was not the subject matter. It was the fact that I made the visit. He found it astonishing that a spavined antique like me would come to his office to ask about this sort of topic in theoretical physics.

"What you are suggesting is not just *permitted* in today's view of space and time, Mr. Davies," he said. "It's absolutely *required*. You can't do something to *space*—such as making an instantaneous link between two places, as you have been suggesting—without at the same time having profound effects on *time*. Space and time are really a single entity. Distances and elapsed times are intimately related, like two sides of the same coin."

"And the line-vortex generator?" I said. I had told him far less about this, mainly because all I knew of it had been told to us by John Martindale.

"Well, if the generator in some sense approximated an infinitely long, rapidly rotating cylinder, then yes. General relativity insists that very peculiar things would happen there. There could be global causality violations—'before' and 'after' getting confused, cause and effect becoming mixed up, that sort of thing. God knows what time and space look like near the line singularity itself. But don't misunderstand me. Before any of these things could happen, you would have to be dealing with a huge system, something many times as massive as the Sun."

I resisted the urge to tell him he was wrong. Apparently he did not accept John Martindale's unshakable confidence in the idea that with better technology came increase in capability *and* decrease in size. I stood up and leaned on my cane. My left hip was a little dodgy and became tired if I walked too far. "You've been very helpful."

"Not at all." He stood up, too, and said, "Actually, I'm going to be giving a lecture at the Institute on these subjects in a couple of weeks. If you'd like to come . . . "

I noted down the time and place, but I knew I would not be there. It was three months to the day since John Martindale, Helga, and I had climbed the rock face and walked behind the waterfall. Time—my time—was short. I had to head south again.

The flight to Argentina was uneventful. Comodoro Rivadavia was the same as always. Now I am sitting in Alberto McShane's bar, drinking one last beer (all that my digestion today will permit) and waiting for the pilot. McShane did not recognize me, but the armadillo did. It trundled to my table, and sat looking up at me. *Where's my friend John Martindale?* it was saying.

Where indeed? I will tell you soon. The plane is ready. We are going to Trapalanda.

It will take all my strength, but I think I can do it. I have added equipment that will help me to cross that icy field of boulders and ascend

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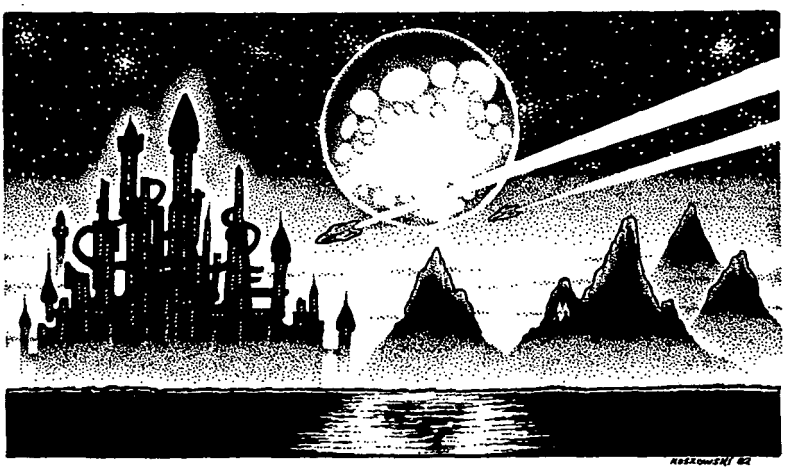
the rock face. It is September. The weather will be warmer, and the going easier. If I close my eyes I can see the portal now, behind the waterfall, its black depths and shimmering blue streaks rushing away toward the vanishing point.

Thirty-five years. That is what the portal owes me. It sucked them out of my body as I struggled back against the gravity gradient. Maybe it is impossible to get them back. I don't know. My young mathematician friend insisted that time is infinitely fluid, with no more constraints on movement through it than there are on travel through space. I don't know, but I want my thirty-five years. If I die in the attempt, I will be losing little.

I am terrified of that open gate, with its alien twisting of the world's geometry. I am more afraid of it than I have ever been of anything. Last time I failed, and I could not go through it. But I will go through it now.

This time I have something more than Martindale's scientific curiosity to drive me on. It is not thoughts of danger or death that fill my mind as I sit here. I have that final image of Helga, reaching out and taking John Martindale's hand in hers. Reaching out, to grasp his hand, voluntarily. I love Helga, I am sure of that, but I cannot make sense of my other emotions; fear, jealousy, resentment, hope, excitement. She was *touching* him. Did she do it because she wanted to go through the portal, wanted it so much that every fear was insignificant? Or had she, after thirty years, finally found someone whom she could touch without cringing and loathing?

The pilot has arrived. My glass is empty. Tomorrow I will know. ●



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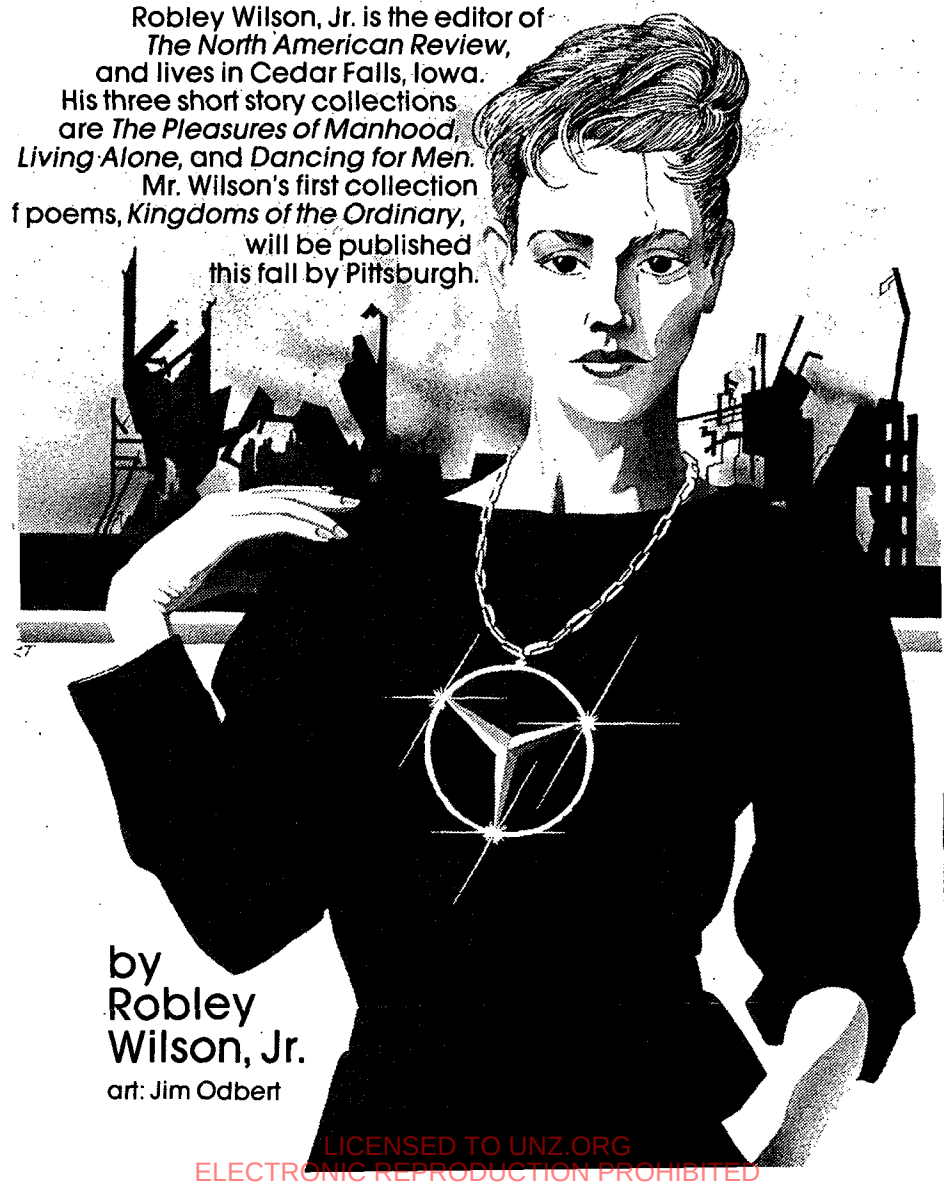
FLAGGERS

Robley Wilson, Jr. is the editor of *The North American Review*, and lives in Cedar Falls, Iowa. His three short story collections are *The Pleasures of Manhood*, *Living Alone*, and *Dancing for Men*. Mr. Wilson's first collection f poems, *Kingdoms of the Ordinary*, will be published this fall by Pittsburgh.



by
Robley
Wilson, Jr.

art: Jim Odbert

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We came around a long curve outside Fairfax, blue-green meadows on either side of us, a suggestion of violet mountains on the horizon behind us. Gentle, tall horses, bay and chestnut and roan, grazed near the highway. Traffic was sparse; it was a Wednesday, early afternoon of a warm September. FLAGGER AHEAD, said the orange signboard.

"Wouldn't you know," I said to Marta. "They're always tearing up something."

She didn't answer—just reached across to squeeze the hand I had already lifted to the shift lever, ready to stop. She knew what I was really thinking.

"It's okay," I said.

"Your hand is sweaty."

"I know. Just a reflex."

She gave the hand one last bit of pressure, then let go. I felt the coolness where her touch had been.

"Don't lose your temper," Marta said. "Don't make things worse."

The road made one last slalom, left then right, and we could see the flagger for the first time.

"It's a woman," Marta said.

I brought the car to a stop twenty or twenty-five feet short of where she stood with the red octagon towering above her. She motioned me forward—a delicate woman, with short blonde hair and even features in a small, round face. A brush of sunburn over the bridge of her nose. Red bandana, faded work shirt, jeans too large for her. She was alone; no work party, no road machinery. A pretty young woman in a pretty setting.

I coasted alongside, rolled down the window. "Nice day for it," I said.

The young woman bent forward to look across me at Marta.

"Hi," Marta said.

"Hi." The woman gave her attention back to me. "Where you headed?"

"D.C.," I said.

"Government?"

"No, no. Just a couple of days off. Thought we'd do the zoo, a museum or two, maybe a concert."

"Staying at a hotel?"

"No," I said. "Friends."

"In Georgetown," Marta said.

A half-smile touched the woman's face. She stepped away from the car and gestured for us to go on.

"There's another flag stop about a mile this side of Falls Church," she said. "Name's David. Tell him I passed you through."

"Thank you," I said. I pushed the shift lever into first gear. "What do they call you?"

"Patsy," she said. "My name's Patsy."

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She gave us a little salute and a twirl of the signpost. Marta and I both waved as we left her behind us. Marta half-turned in the seat and watched Patsy out the back window.

"What's she doing?" I said.

"She's got a hand CB. She's talking to somebody."

"Damn it all," I said. I jerked the gearshift into second. "Damn it, damn it, damn it."

You never knew what to expect. The authorities—you always assumed there were "authorities"—printed up weekly lists of safe enclaves, but the flaggers were like ghosts, like the guerrilla fighters in 'Nam or Salvador or South Africa: what was safe on Sunday was a red zone by Tuesday. You made your plans and you took your chances. If you were smart, usually you made out all right. If you were foolish, you hoped you'd be lucky.

We came over a shallow hill, the car bumping across the broken cement of the Interstate, and let ourselves be funneled by black and yellow temporary barriers into the breakdown lane. From a half-mile off we could see David, almost as tall as his sign, facing us with his legs planted well apart. Defiant.

"Don't fuss," Marta said.

"I won't. But it gripes the hell out of me, how arrogant they're getting. You can almost see the Monument from here."

"They could be a real repair crew."

"Oh, sure," I said. "And I'm Santa Claus."

David stepped back to the end of the barrier and motioned me to stop beside him. Other men were hanging out nearby—a rough lot, with beards and filthy dungarees, a few with stained fatigues, baseball caps. Some of them might have been deserters; even convicts. You heard a lot of stories. Still no sign of construction equipment.

"No shovels," I said. "Not even a pile of gravel for show."

"Hush," Marta said.

David had lowered himself to a squatting position, his left hand high on the pole. He might have been thirty-five—perfectly capable of holding a job. And brawny. Shoulders like an ox.

"Where you coming from?" he said.

Very bad teeth.

"Warrenton."

He tipped his head to study Marta. "That your wife?"

"Yes."

"What do you call her?"

"Marta."

He pondered. "Classy name," he said finally.

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Marta smiled and looked away.

"Patsy sent us through," I said. "She said we should tell you that."

"Patsy's my niece," David said. "Nice-looking girl."

"Yes, indeed."

"Lovely," Marta said.

"Damn right."

He took off his cap. It was sweat-stained and dusty, black with a faded orange bill—Orioles?—and wiped his brow with his forearm. Receding hairline. Freckled scalp.

"Nice automobile," he said. "What's the make?"

"Mercedes," I said.

He nodded. "Fancy foreign job."

"I don't own it, actually," I said.

He gave me a curious look. "You steal it?"

"Lease," I said. "I'm just leasing it."

David stood up, let the sign fall to the road in back of him, and walked slowly around the car. He rested his foot on the front bumper and put his full weight on it; the front end dipped and came back up slowly. He finished his circuit and knelt at my window.

"Good shocks," he said. "This a diesel?"

"Yes."

"Six-cylinder?"

"Five."

The number seemed to startle him. "You sure?" he said. "Five?"

"That's what it's got," I said.

David nodded, surveying the car, thoughtful. I wondered what he would do. What *they* would do. Now he was up again, looking in at the back seat.

"What's that leather case?"

"Camera."

"Let's have a look-see."

My impulse was to object, to refuse, but Marta had already reached back for the camera case and was handing it across me.

"Much obliged, Mrs. Mercedes," David said. He snapped open the case and flopped the cover back. "Japanese," he said. "Very swanky." He put the view-finder up to his eye and took a couple of steps backward. "Say 'surplus,' " he said, and clicked the shutter.

Marta leaned close to me. "We're at mile-marker seven," she whispered. "We can tell the police exactly where to look for them."

I shook my head. *Don't kid yourself*, is what I wanted to say. David had made another step back from the car and taken a second picture.

"I wonder if you folks would mind getting out of the car," he said. The camera was poised at the level of his chest. "I think some of the boys

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here would appreciate being snapped in the company of such classy people."

"I don't know," I said. "We don't want to be late for dinner with our friends."

"We'd count it a considerable favor," David said. "Get out."

I slipped the ignition key into my jacket pocket as I left the car. Marta got out on the other side and walked around the back to stand beside me. A couple of the other "workmen" had come up to the car, and now they stood on either side of us while David aimed the camera.

"These two friends of mine are Morley and Chris," he said. The shutter clicked and clicked again. One of the features of the camera is automatic advance, driven by a solar battery. "Gentlemen, this is Mr. and Mrs. Mercedes, on their way to our nation's capital to see a show and feed their faces."

I thought the men looked embarrassed; they nodded to us, but kept their hands in their blue-denim pockets.

"Morley," David said, "why don't you move that automobile? It sort of overwhelms these little candids."

Morley sat in the driver's seat.

"What do you fork out nowadays to lease a brand-spanking-new five-cylinder-diesel Mercedes see-dan?" David said. "I ask purely for information."

"Five-twenty a month," I told him. "That's plus insurance."

David grinned. "You be careful of this machine, Morley. It be somewhat beyond your means."

"He's hid the ignition key," Morley said.

David snapped the leather case closed over the camera and hung it by its carrying strap over the car's outside mirror. "Give the man the key," he told me.

Marta had taken my arm; I felt the anxious pressure of her hands, and I knew how frightened she was—not for herself, but for me. I got the key ring out of my pocket and handed it into the car.

"Our house keys are on that ring," I said. But what I was thinking was: What's the point? You work hard all your life, you save and invest, you begin to own the things you've always wanted, and then what? Along comes somebody—a David, a Morley, a nameless welfare type—and takes it away.

"We don't want the house keys," David said. "You'll get them back." He gestured at Morley, who started up the Mercedes and pulled it off the highway into the nearby meadow.

"Why don't you two make yourselves comfortable over there," David said. He indicated a patch of grass on the opposite side of the road. "We won't keep you long."

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"What are you going to do to us?" Marta asked.

David smiled. "Nothing more to you than you always did to us," he said. "Don't you worry yourself."

They had a tow truck and a stake truck with a tarp over the back of it, and they began by siphoning the fuel out of the Mercedes tank into five-gallon cans. While that was going on, Morley and a couple of other men jacked the car up and set the frame on cement blocks. David was overseeing the jobs; no question that he was the leader of the flaggers.

I knew they were going to steal everything they could, and I also knew no one else would come along to interrupt them. Patsy would stop everyone at her roadblock and send them on a long detour around us. Marta and I couldn't do anything but watch, and listen to rock music blasting at top volume out of a boom-box perched on a fender of the tow truck.

David came back to us, apparently satisfied that the work was properly under way. He dropped the key ring into my hand and sat down next to me with a heavy sigh. He smelled of tobacco and sweat that had gone rancid. People were inside the car now, stripping the leather upholstery. Outside, two of the wheels were off and loaded onto the stake truck with the cans of diesel fuel. Two women were removing pieces of chrome.

"You know," David said, "I remember when cars had hubcaps, or if they didn't have hubcaps they had wheel covers. I used to walk the ditches back home in West Virginia, looking for those big chrome-plated dishes to sell. I had a display next to my garage taller than I was and wider than a good-sized barn. I'll tell you: It was a pretty sight." He took a cigarette out of a crushed pack and struck a wooden match against the bottom of his shoe. "All that chrome, shiny in the sunlight. You could see it from miles off."

"This car has mags," I said. All four wheels and the spare were already off the car. "Standard."

"Know a fellow who reclaims it," David said. "The magnesium metal. Don't ask me how."

"What do you do with the leather?"

"Gloves," he said. "Something you can't do with vinyl. Vinyl gets used for jackets, boots. Too stiff for gloves."

"That makes sense," I said. And it did. It wasn't that I was beginning to approve of what these outcasts were doing to a material possession of my own, but that the logic of it, and the sheer efficiency, was something you had to admire. They had the hood off the car by now; they'd disconnected the hoses and wiring harnesses, and unfastened bolts and mounts, and now they'd wrapped a chain around the engine. The tow truck was winching the diesel out of the car.

"What will you do with that?" I said.

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"That five-cylinder beauty?" David scratched his head and resettled the Orioles cap so that the bill was almost down to his nose. "I expect that'll be the makings of a generator somewhere." He tipped his head and looked sidelong at Marta and me. "If there's some particular thing off that machine you'd like to keep," he said, "you just speak up."

I looked at Marta; she shook her head. "I wouldn't mind keeping the hood ornament," I said. "A little souvenir."

David grinned. "You got it," he said.

He got up and ambled into the meadow where the Mercedes hood lay. A young woman was unscrewing the grille from the sheet metal. We watched him remove the star emblem with a quick twist of his wrist.

"At least we saved something," I said.

"Don't blame yourself," Marta said. "Who knows what these hoodlums would have done to you if you'd stood up to them."

David's shadow fell across us then, and I wasn't able to say that I was less concerned about myself than about her. He handed me the Mercedes emblem, the little spring that had held it in the shell of the radiator grille still dangling from it. "There you go," he said.

"Thanks."

He didn't resume his seat beside me. Instead he pointed toward the city and with his other hand motioned for us to stand up. "About a mile and a half past that rise," he said. "That's all the further you'll have to walk to find transportation. I doubt you'll even miss your show."

I tell this story at the club, and at parties where politics is a topic, and everyone agrees we were fortunate. The car was covered by the insurance. The trauma of the whole adventure was something Marta and I were emotionally strong enough to take in stride, and we never even bothered with therapy. Marta had the radiator emblem made into a necklace; she wears it with her black sweater and calls it her lucky star.

We've learned lessons, of course. We drive a Chevy, stripped—no radio, no tape deck, no fancy sport package. We bought one of the cheaper Polaroids for vacation snapshots. For a while, I kept a revolver—a Smith & Wesson .32—in the glove compartment, but I stopped after that fellow from Baltimore was shot with his own gun at a roadblock outside Philadelphia.

The people who robbed us—David and Morley and Patsy and all that flagger crowd—they got clean away, of course. The authorities found the Mercedes, what was left of it, in the field where it had been dismantled. The final blow was that somebody had set fire to it, so you couldn't even imagine how beautiful it had been once upon a time with its saddle leather and its burled-walnut dash and its dazzling champagne-metallic paint work. ●

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by Orson Scott Card

RUNAWAY

"Runaway" is set in the same milieu as Orson Scott Card's popular, and highly regarded novelette, "Hatrack River" (*IAsfm*, August 1986). Indeed, the latter story, and Mr. Card's novel, *Speaker for the Dead*, are currently both finalists for the 1986 Nebula awards.

art: Nicholas Jainschigg

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Peggy woke up in the morning with a dream of Alvin Miller filling her heart with all kinds of terrible desires. She wanted to run from that boy, and to stay and wait for him; to forget she knew him, and to watch him always.

She lay there on her bed with her eyes almost closed, watching the grey dawnlight steal into the attic room where she slept. I'm holding something, she noticed. The corners of it clenched into her hands so tight that when she let go her palm hurt like she been stung. But she wasn't stung. It was just the box where she kept Alvin's birth caul. Or maybe, thought Peggy, maybe she *had* been stung, stung deep, and only just now did she feel the pain of it.

Peggy wanted to throw that box just as far from her as she could, bury it deep and forget where she buried it, drown it underwater and pile rocks on so it wouldn't float.

Oh, but I don't mean that, she said silently, I'm sorry for thinking such a thing, I'm plain sorry, but he's coming now, after all these years he's coming to Hatrack River and he won't be the boy I seen in all the paths of his future, he won't be the man I see him turning into. No, he's still just a boy, just eleven years old. He's seen him enough of life that somewise maybe he's a man inside, he's seen grief and pain enough for someone five times his age, but it's still an eleven-year-old boy he'll be when he walks into this town.

And I don't want to see no eleven-year-old Alvin come here. He'll be looking for me, right enough. He knows I saw his future on the rainy dark day when he was born, and so he'll come, and he'll say to me, "Peggy, I know you're a torch, and I know you wrote in Taleswapper's book that I'm to be a Maker. So tell me what I'm supposed to be." Peggy knew just what he'd say, and every way he might choose to say it—hadn't she seen it a hundred times, a thousand times? And she'd teach him and he'd become a great man, a true Maker, and—

And then one day, when he's a handsome figure of twenty-one and I'm a sharp-tongued spinster of twenty-six he'll feel so *grateful* to me, so *obligated*, that he'll propose himself for marriage to me as his bounden duty. And I, being lovesick all these years, full of dreams of what he'll do and what we'll be together, I'll say yes, and saddle him with a wife he wished he didn't have to marry, and his eyes will hunger for other women all the days of our lives together—

Peggy wished, oh she wished so deep, wished that she didn't know for certain things would be that way. But Peggy was a torch right enough, the strongest torch she'd ever heard of, stronger even than the folk hereabouts in Hatrack River ever guessed.

She sat up in bed and did not throw the box or hide it or break it or bury it. She opened it. Inside lay the last scrap of Alvin's birth caul, as

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dry and white as paper ash in a cold hearth. Eleven years ago when Peggy's mama served as midwife to pull baby Alvin out of the well of life, and Alvin first sucked for breath in the damp air of Papa's Hatrack River Roadhouse, Peggy peeled that thin and bloody caul from the baby's face so he could breathe. Alvin, the seventh son of a seventh son, and the thirteenth child—Peggy saw at once what the paths of his life would be. Death, that was where he was headed, death from a hundred different accidents in a world that seemed bent on killing him even before he was hardly alive.

She was Little Peggy then, a girl of five, but she'd been torching for two years already, and in that time she never did a seeing on a birthing child who had so many paths to death. Peggy searched up all the paths of his life, and found in all of them but one single way that boy could live to be a man.

That was if she kept that birth caul, and watched him from afar off, and whenever she saw death reaching out to take him, she'd use that caul. Take just a pinch of it and grind it between her fingers and whisper what had to happen, see it in her mind. And it would happen just the way she said. Hadn't she held him up from drowning? Saved him from a wallowing buffalo? Caught him from sliding off a roof? She even split a roof beam once, when it was like to fall from fifty feet up and squash him on the floor of a half-built church; she split that beam neat as you please, so it fell on one side of him and the other, with just a space for him to stand there in between. And a hundred other times when she acted so early that nobody ever even guessed his life had been saved, even those times she saved him, using the caul.

How did it work? She hardly knew. Except that it was his own power she was using, the gift born right in him. Over the years he'd learned somewhat about his knack for making things and shaping them and holding them together and splitting them apart. Finally this last year, all caught up in the wars between Red men and White, he'd taken charge of saving his own life, so she hardly had to do a thing to save him anymore. Good thing, too. There wasn't much of that caul left.

She closed the lid of the box. I don't want to see him, thought Peggy. I don't want to know any more about him.

But her fingers opened that lid right back up, cause of course she had to know. She'd lived half her life, it seemed like, touching that caul and searching for his heartfire away far off in the northwest Wobbish country, in the town of Vigor Church, seeing how he was doing, looking up the paths of his future to see what danger lay in ambush. And when she was sure he was safe, she'd look farther ahead, and see him coming back one day to Hatrack River, where he was born, coming back and looking into her face and saying, It was you who saved me all those times, you who

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saw I was a Maker back afore a living soul thought such a thing was possible. And then she'd watch him learn the great depths of his power, the work he had to do, the crystal city he had to build; she saw him sire babies on her, and saw him touch the nursing infants she held in her arms; she saw the ones they buried and the ones that lived; and last of all she saw him—

Tears came down her face. I don't want to know, she said. I don't want to know all the roads of the future. Other girls can dream of love, the joys of marriage, of being mothers to strong healthy babies; but all my dreams have dying in them, too, and pain, and fear, because my dreams are true dreams, I know more than a body can know and still have any hope inside her soul.

Yet Peggy *did* hope. Yes sir, you can be sure of it—she still clung to a kind of desperate hope, because even knowing what's likely to come down the pathways of a body's life, she still caught her some glimpses, some clear plain visions of certain days, certain hours, certain passing moments of joy so great it was worth the grief just to get there.

Trouble was those glimpses were so rare and small in the spreading futures of Alvin's life that she couldn't find a road that led there. All the pathways she could find easily, the plain ones, the ones most likely to become real, those all led to Alvin wedding her without love, out of gratitude and duty, a miserable marriage. Like the story of Leah in the Bible, whose beautiful husband Jacob hated her even though she loved him dear and bore him more babies than his other wives and would've died for him if he'd as much as asked her.

It's an evil thing God did to women, thought Peggy, to make us hanker after husband and children till it leads us to a life of sacrifice and misery and grief. Was Eve's sin so terrible, that God should curse all women with that mighty curse? You will groan and bear children, said Almighty Merciful God. You will be eager for your husband, and he will rule over you.

That was what was burning in her—eagerness for her husband. Even though he was only an eleven-year-old boy who was looking, not for a wife, but for a teacher. He may be just a boy, thought Peggy, but I'm a woman, and I've seen the man he'll be, and I yearn for him. She pressed one hand against her breast; it felt so large and soft, still somewhat out of place on her body, which used to be all sticks and corners like a shanty cabin, and now was softening, like a calf being fattened up for the return of the prodigal.

She shuddered, thinking what happened to the fatted calf, and once again touched the caul, and *looked*:

In the distant town of Vigor Church, young Alvin was breakfasting his last morning at his mother's table. The pack he was to carry on his

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journey to Hatrack River lay on the floor beside the table. His mother's tears flowed undisguised across her cheeks. The boy loved his mother, but never for a moment did he feel sorry to be leaving. His home was a dark place now, stained with too much innocent blood for him to hanker to stay. He was eager to be off, to start his life as a prentice boy to the blacksmith of Hatrack River, and to find the Torch girl who saved his life when he was born. He couldn't eat another bite. He pushed back from the table, stood up, kissed his mama—

Peggy let go the caul and closed the lid of the box as tight and quick as if she was trying to catch a fly inside.

Coming to find me. Coming to start a life of misery together. Go ahead and cry, Faith Miller, but not because your little boy Alvin's on his way east. You cry for me, the woman whose life your boy will wreck. You shed your tears for one more woman's lonely pain.

Peggy shuddered, shook off the bleak mood of the grey dawn, and dressed herself quickly, ducking her head to avoid the low sloping cross-beams of the attic roof. Over the years she'd learned ways to push thoughts of Alvin Miller Junior clean out of her mind, long enough to do her duty as daughter in her parents' household and as torch for the people of the country hereabouts. She could go hours without thinking about that boy, when she set her mind to it. And though it was harder now, knowing he was about to set his foot on the road toward her that very morning, she still put thoughts of him aside.

Peggy opened the curtain of the south-facing window and sat before it, leaning on the sill. She looked out over the forest that still stretched from the roadhouse, down the Hatrack River and on to the Hio, with only a few pig farms here and there to block the way. Of course she couldn't *see* the Hio, not that many miles from here, not even in the clear cool air of springtime. But what her natural eyes couldn't see, the burning torch in her could find easy enough. To see the Hio, she had only to search for a far-off heartfire, then slip herself inside that fellow's flame, and see out of his eyes as easy as she could see out of her own. And once there, once she had ahold of someone's heartfire, she could see other things, too, not just what he saw, but what he thought and felt and wished for. And even more: Flickering away in the brightest parts of the flame, often hidden by all the noise of the fellow's present thoughts and wishes, she could see the paths ahead of him, the choices coming to him, the life he'd make for himself if he chose this or that or another way in the hours and days to come.

Peggy could see so much in other people's heartfires that she hardly was acquainted with her own.

She thought of herself sometimes like that lone lookout boy at the tip-top of a ship's mast. Not that she ever saw her a ship in her whole life,

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except the rafts on the Hio and one time a canal boat on the Irrakwa Canal. But she read some books, as many as ever she could get Doctor Whitley Physicker to bring back to her from his visits to Dekane. So she knew about the lookout on the mast. Clinging to the rigging, arms half-wrapped in the lines so he didn't fall if there was a sudden roll or pitch of the boat, or a gust of wind unlooked-for; froze blue in winter, burnt red in summer; and nothing to do all day, all the long long hours of his watch, but look out onto the empty blue ocean. If it was a pirate ship, the lookout watched for victims' sails. If it was a whaler, he looked for blows and breaches. Most ships, he just looked for land, for shoals, for hidden sand bars; looked for pirates or some sworn enemy of his nation's flag.

Most days he never saw a thing, not a thing, just waves and dipping sea birds and fluffy clouds.

I am on a lookout perch, thought Peggy. Sent up aloft some sixteen years ago the day I was born, and kept here ever since, never once let down below, never once allowed to rest within the narrow bunkspace of the lowest deck, never once allowed to so much as close a hatch over my head or a door behind my back. Always, always I'm on watch, looking far and near. And because it isn't my natural eyes I look through, I can't shut them, not even in sleep.

No escape from it at all. Sitting here in the attic, she could see without trying:

Mother, known to others as Old Peg Guester, known to herself as Margaret, cooking in the kitchen for the slew of guests due in for one of her suppers. Not like she has any particular knack for cooking, either, so kitchen work is hard, she isn't like Gertie Smith who can make salt pork taste a hundred different ways on a hundred different days. Peg Guester's knack is in womenstuff, midwifery and house hexes, but to make a good inn takes good food and now Oldpappy's gone she has to cook, so she thinks only of the kitchen and couldn't hardly stand interruption, least of all from her daughter who mopes around the house and hardly speaks at all and by and large that girl is the most unpleasant, ill-favored child even though she started out so sweet and promising, everything in life turns sour somehow . . .

Oh, that was such a joy, to know how little your own mama cared for you. Never mind that Peggy also knew the fierce devotion that her mama had. Knowing that a portion of love abides in your mama's heart doesn't take away but half the sting of knowing her dislike for you as well.

And Papa, known to others as Horace Guester, keeper of the Hatrack River Roadhouse. A jolly fellow, Papa was, even now out in the dooryard telling tales to a guest who was having trouble getting away from the inn. He and Papa always seemed to have something more to talk about,

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and oh, that guest, a circuit lawyer from up Cleveland way, he fancied Horace Guester was just about the finest most upstanding citizen he ever met, if all folks was as good-hearted as old Horace there'd be no more crime and no more lawyering in the upriver Hio country. Everybody felt that way. Everybody loved old Horace Guester.

But his daughter, Peggy the torch, she saw into his heartfire and knew how he felt about it. He saw those folks a-smiling at him and he said to himself, If they knew what I really was they'd spit in the road at my feet and walk away and forget they ever saw my face or knew my name.

Peggy sat there in her attic room and all the heartfires glowed, all of them in town. Her parents' most, cause she knew them best; the lodgers who stayed in the roadhouse; and then the people of the town.

Nat Smith and his wife Gertie and their three snot-nose children planning devilment when they weren't puking or piddling—Peggy saw Nat's pleasure in the shaping of iron, his loathing for his own children, his disappointment as his wife changed from a fascinating unattainable vision of beauty into a stringy-haired hag who screamed at the children first and then came to use the same voice to scream at Nat.

Paulie Wiseman, the sheriff, loving to make folks a-scared of him; Whitley Physicker, angry at himself because his medicine didn't work more than half the time, and every week he saw death he couldn't do a thing about. New folks, old folks, farmers, and professionals, she saw through their eyes and into their hearts. She saw the marriage beds that were cold at night and the adulteries kept secret in guilty hearts. She saw the thievery of trusted clerks and friends and servants, and the honorable hearts inside many who were despised and looked down on.

She saw it all, and said nothing. Kept her mouth shut. Talked to no one. Cause she wasn't going to lie. She promised years before that she'd never lie, and kept her word by keeping still.

Other folks didn't have her problem. They could talk and tell the truth. But Peggy couldn't tell the truth. She knew these folks too well. She knew what they all were scared of, what they all wanted, what they all had done that they'd kill her or theirself if they once got a notion that she knew. Even the ones who never done a bad thing, they'd be so ashamed to think she knew their secret dreams or private craziness. So she never could speak frankly to these folks, or something would slip out, not even a word maybe, it might be just the way she turned her head, the way she sidestepped some line of talk, and they'd know that she knew, or just fear that she knew, or just fear. Just fear alone, without even naming what it was, and it could undo them, some of them, the weakest of them.

She was a lookout all the time, alone atop the mast, hanging to the

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lines, seeing more than she ever wanted to, and never getting even a minute to herself.

When it wasn't some baby being born, so she had to go and do a seeing, then it was some folks in trouble somewhere that had to be helped. It didn't do her no good to sleep, neither. She never slept all the way. Always a part of her was looking, and saw the fire burning, saw it flash.

Like now. Now this very moment, as she looked out over the forest, there it was. A heartfire burning ever so far off.

She swung herself close in—not her body, of course, her flesh stayed right there in the attic—but being a torch she knew how to look *close* at far-off heartfires.

It was a young woman. No, a girl, even younger than herself. And strange inside, so she knew right off this girl first spoke a language that wasn't English, even though she spoke and thought in English now. It made her thoughts all twisty and queer. But some things run deeper than the tracks that words leave in your brain; Little Peggy didn't need no help understanding that baby the girl held in her arms, and the way she stood at the river bank knowing she would die, and what a horror waited for her back at the plantation, and what she'd done last night to get away.

See the sun there, three fingers over the trees. This runaway Black slave girl and her little bastard half-white boy-baby, see them standing on the shore of the Hio, half hid up in trees and bushes, watching as the White men pole them rafts on down. She a-scared, she know them dogs can't find her but very soon they get them the runaway finder, very worse thing, and how she ever cross that river with this boy-baby?

She cotch her a terrible thought: I leave this boy-baby, I hide him in this rotten log, I swim and steal the boat and I come back to here. That do the job, yes sir.

But then this Black girl who nobody never teach how to be a mama, she know a good mama don't leave this baby who still gots to suck two-hand times a day. She whisper, Good mama don't leave a little boy-baby where old fox or weasel or badger come and nibble off little parts and kill him dead. No ma'am, not me.

So she just set down here a-hold of this baby, and watch the river flow on, might as well be the seashore cause she never get across.

Maybe some White folks help her? Here on the Appalachee shore the White folk hang them as help a slavegirl run away. But this runaway Black slavegirl hear stories on the plantation, about Whites who say nobody better be own by nobody else. Who say this Black girl better have that same right like the White lady, she say no to any man be not her true husband. Who say this Black girl better can keep her baby, not let

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them White boss promise he sell it on weaning day, they send this boy-baby to grow up into a house slave in Drydenshire, kiss a white man's feet if he say boo.

"Oh, your baby is so *lucky*," they say to this slavegirl. "He'll grow up in a fine lord's mansion in the Crown Colonies, where they still have a king—he might even *see* the King someday."

She don't say nothing but she laugh inside. She don't set no store to see a king. Her pa a king back in Africa and they shoot him dead. Them Portuguese slavers show her what it mean to be a king—it mean you die quick like everybody, and spill blood red like everybody, and cry out loud in pain and scared—oh, *fine* to be a king, and *fine* to see one. Do them White folk believe this lie?

I don't believe them. I say I believe them but I lie. I never let them take him my boy-baby. A king grandson him, and I tell him every day he growing up. When he the tall king, ain't nobody hit him with the stick or he hit them back, and nobody take his woman, spread her like a slaughterpig and stick this half-White baby in her but he can't do nothing, he sit in his cabin and cry. No ma'am, no sir.

So she do the forbidden evil ugly bad thing. She steal two candles and hot them all soft by the cookfire. She mash them like dough, she mash in milk from her own teat after boy-baby suck, and she mash some of her spit in the wax too, and then she push it and poke it and roll it in ash till she see a poppet shape like Black slavegirl. Her very own self.

Then she hide this Black slavegirl poppet and she go to Fat Fox and beg him feathers off that big old blackbird he cotch him.

"Black slavegirl don't need her no feathers," say Fat Fox.

"I make a boogy for my boy-baby," she say.

Fat Fox laugh, he know she lie. "Ain't no blackfeather boogy. I never heared of such a thing."

Black slavegirl, she say, "My papa king in Umbawana. I know all secret thing."

Fat Fox shake his head, he laugh, he laugh. "What do you know, anyway? You can't even talk English. I'll give you all the blackbird feathers you want, but when that baby stops sucking you come to me and I'll give you another baby, *all* Black this time."

She hate Fat Fox like White Boss, but he got him blackbird feathers so she say, "Yes sir."

Two hands she fill up with feathers. She laugh inside. She far away and dead before Fat Fox never put him no baby in her.

She cover Black slavegirl poppet with feathers till she little girlshape bird. Very strong thing, this poppet with her own milk and spit in it, blackbird feathers on. Very strong, suck all her life out, but boy-baby, he never kiss no White Boss feet, White Boss never lay no lash on him.

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Dark night, moon not showing yet. She slip out her cabin. Boy-baby suck so he make no sound. She tie that baby to her teat so he don't fall. She toss that poppet on the fire. Then all the power of the feather come out, burning, burning, burning. She feel this fire pour into her. She spread her wings, oh so wide, spread them, flap like she see that big old blackbird flap. She rise up into the air, high up in that dark night, she rise and fly, far away north she fly, and when that moon he come up, she keep him at her right hand so she get this boy-baby to land where White say Black girl never slave, half-White boy-baby never slave.

Come morning and the sun and she don't fly no more. Oh, like dying, like dying she think, walking her feet on the ground. That bird with her wing broke, she pray for Fat Fox to find her, she know that now. After you fly, make you sad to walk, hurt you bad to walk, like a slave with chains, that dirt under your feet.

But she walk with that boy-baby all morning and now she come to this wide river. This close I come, say runaway Black slavegirl. I fly this far, I just this river to cross. But that sun come up and I come down before this river. Now I never cross, old finder find me somehow, whup me half dead, take my boy-baby, sell him south.

Not me. I trick them. I die first.

No, I die second.

Other folks could argue about whether slavery was a mortal sin or just a quaint custom. Other folks could bicker on about how Emancipationists were too crazy to put up with even though slavery was a real bad thing. Other folks could look at Blacks and feel sorry for them but still be somewhat glad they were mostly in Africa or in the Crown Colonies or in Canada or somewhere else far and gone. Peggy couldn't afford the luxury of having opinions on the subject. All she knew was that no heartfire ever was in such pain as the soul of a Black who lived in the thin dark shadow of the lash.

We are a vicious people, said Peggy to herself. All us White folk. Bad enough we took the Red man's land and drove him off or tamed him or killed him. But the Black man had no land, and so we took his muscle and bone; the Black woman had no property, and so we took her womb.

Peggy leaned out the attic window, called out: "Papa!"

He strode out from the front of the house, walked into the road, where he could look up and see her window. "You call me, Peggy?"

She just looked at him, said naught, and that was all the signal that he needed. He good-byed and fare-thee-welled that guest so fast the poor old coot was halfway into the main part of town before he knew what hit him. Pa was already inside and up the stairs.

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"A girl with a babe," she told him. "On the far side of the Hio, scared and thinking of killing herself if she's caught."

"How far along the Hio?"

"Just down from the Hatrack Mouth, near as I can guess. Papa, I'm coming with you."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am, Papa. You'll never find her, not you nor ten more like you. She's too scared of White men, and she's got cause."

Papa looked at her, unsure what to do. He'd never let her come before, but usually it was Black men what ran off. But then, usually she found them this side the Hio, lost and scared, so it was safer. Crossing into Appalachee, it was prison for sure if they were caught helping a Black escape. Prison if it wasn't a quick rope on a tree. Emancipationists didn't fare well South of the Hio, and still less the kind of Emancipationist who helped run-off bucks and ewes and pickaninnies get north to French country up in Canada.

"Too dangerous across the river," he said.

"All the more reason you need me. To find her, and to spot if anyone else happens along."

"Your mother would kill me if she knew I was taking you."

"Then I'll leave now, out the back."

"Tell her you're going to visit Mrs. Smith—"

"I'll tell her nothing or I'll tell the truth, Papa.

"Then I'll stay up here and pray the good Lord saves my life by not letting her notice you leaving. We'll meet up at Hatrack Mouth come sundown."

"Can't we—"

"No, we can't, not a minute sooner," he said. "Can't cross the river till dark. If they catch her or she dies afore we get there then it's just too bad, cause we can't cross the Hio in the daylight, bet your life on that."

Noise in the forest, this scare Black slavegirl very bad. Trees grab her, owls screech out telling where they find her, this river just laugh at her all along. She can't move cause she fall in the dark, she hurt this baby. She can't stay cause they find her sure. Flying don't fool them finders, hey look far and see her even a hand of hands away off.

A step for sure. Oh, Lord God Jesus save me from this devil in the dark.

A step, and breathing, and branches they brush aside. But no lantern! Whatever come it see me in the dark! Oh, Lord God Moses Savior Abraham.

"Girl."

That voice, I hear that voice, I can't breathe. Can you hear it, little

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boy-baby? Or do I dream this voice? This lady voice, very soft lady voice. Devil got no lady voice, everybody know, ain't that so?

"Girl, I come to take you across the river and help you and your baby get north and free."

I don't find no words no more, not slave words or Umbawa talk. When I put on feathers do I lose my words?

"We got a good stout rowboat and two strong men to row. I know you understand me and I know you trust me and I know you want to come. So you just set there, girl, you hold my hand, there, that's my hand, you don't have to say a word, you just hold my hand. There's some White men but they're friends and they won't touch you. Nobody's going to touch you except me, you believe that, girl, you just believe it."

Her hand it touch my skin very cool and soft like this lady voice. This lady angel, this Holy Virgin Mother of God.

Lots of steps, heavy steps, and now lanterns and lights and big old White men, but this lady she just hold on my hand.

"Scared plumb to death."

"Look at this girl. She's most wasted away to nothing."

"How many days she been without eating?"

Big men's voices like White Boss who give her this baby.

"She only left her plantation last night," said the Lady.

How this White lady know? She know everything, Eve the mama of all babies. No time to talk, no time to pray, move very quick, lean on this White lady, walk and walk and walk to this boat it lie waiting in the water just like I dream. O! here the boat little boy-baby, boat lift us cross the Jordan to the Promise Land.

They were halfway across the river when the Black girl started shaking and crying and chattering.

"Hush her up," said Horace Guester.

"There's nobody near us," answered Peggy. "No one to hear."

"What's she babbling about?" asked Po Doggly. He was a pig farmer from near Hatrack Mouth and for a moment Peggy thought he was talking about *her*. But no, it was the Black girl he meant.

"She's talking in her African tongue, I reckon," said Peggy. "This girl is really something, how she got away."

"With a baby and all," agreed Po.

"Oh, the baby," said Peggy. "I've got to hold the baby."

"Why's that?" asked Papa.

"Because you're both going to have to carry her," she said. "From shore to the wagon, at least. There's no way this child can walk another step."

When they got to shore, they did just that. Po's old wagon was no great shakes for comfort—one old horseblanket was about as soft as it was

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going to get—but they laid her out and if she minded she didn't say so. Horace held the lantern high and looked at her. "You're plumb right, Peggy."

"What about?" she asked.

"Calling her a child. I swear she couldn't be thirteen. I swear it. And her with a baby. You sure this baby's hers?"

"I'm sure," said Peggy.

Po Doggly chuckled. "Oh, you know them guineas, just like bunny rabbits, the minute they can they do." Then he remembered that Peggy was there. "Begging your pardon, ma'am. We don't never have ladies along till tonight."

"It's *her* pardon you have to beg," said Peggy coldly. "This child is mulatto. Her owner sired this boy without a by-your-leave. I reckon you understand me."

"I won't have you discussing such things," said Horace Guester. His temper was hot, all right. "Bad enough you coming along on this without you knowing all this kind of thing about this poor girl, it ain't right telling her secrets like that."

Peggy fell silent and stayed that way all the ride home. That was what happened whenever she spoke frankly which is why she almost never did. The girl's suffering made her forget herself and talk too much. Now Papa was thinking on about how his daughter knew about this Black girl in just a few minutes, and worrying how much she knew about *him*.

Do you want to know what I know, Papa? I know why you do this. You're not like Po Doggly, Papa, who doesn't think much of Blacks but hates seeing any wild thing cooped up. He does this, helping slaves make their way to Canada, cause he's just got that need in him to set them free. But you, Papa, you do it to pay back your secret sin. Your pretty little secret who smiled at you like heartbreak in person and you could've said no but you didn't, you said yes oh yes. While Mama was expecting me, it was, and you were off in Dekane buying supplies, you stayed there a week and had that woman must be ten times in six days, I remember every one of those times as clear as you do, I can feel you dreaming about her in the night. Hot with shame, hotter with desire, I know just how a man feels when he wants a woman so bad his skin itches and he can't hold still. All these years you've hated yourself for what you did and hated yourself all the more for loving that memory, and so you pay for it. You risk going to jail or getting hung up in a tree somewhere for the crows to pick, not because you love the Black man but because you hope maybe doing good for God's children might just set you free of your own secret love of evil.

And here's the funny thing, Papa. If you knew I knew your secret you would probably die, it might just kill you on the spot. And yet if I could

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tell you, just tell you that I know, then I could tell you something else on top of that, I could say, Papa, don't you see that it's your knack? You who thinks he never had no knack, but you got one. It's the knack for making folks feel loved. They come to your inn and they feel right to home. Well you saw her, and she was hungry, that woman in Dekane, she needed to feel the way you make folks feel, needed you so bad. And it's hard, Papa, hard not to love a body who loves you so powerful, who hangs on to you like clouds hanging onto the moon, knowing you're going to go on, knowing you'll never stay, but hungering, Papa. I looked for that woman, looked for her heartfire, far and wide I searched for her, and I found her. I know where she is. She ain't pretty now like you remembered. I reckon she never *was* as pretty as you recall her, Papa. But she's a good woman, and you done her no harm. She remembers you fondly, Papa. She knows God forgave her and you both. It's you who won't forgive, Papa.

Such a sad thing, Peggy thought, coming home in that wagon. Papa's doing something that would make him a hero in any other daughter's eyes. A great man. But because I'm a torch, I know the truth. He doesn't come out here like Hector afore the gates of Troy, risking death to save other folks. He comes slinking like a whipped dog, cause he *is* a whipped dog inside. He runs out here to hide from a sin that the good Lord would have forgave long ago if he just allowed forgiveness to be possible.

Soon enough, though, Peggy stopped thinking it was sad about her Papa. It was sad about most *everybody*, wasn't it? But most sad people just kept right on being sad, hanging onto misery like the last keg of water in a drouth. Like the way Peggy kept waiting here for Alvin even though she knew he'd bring no joy to her.

It was that girl in the back of the wagon who was different. She had a terrible misery coming on her, going to lose her boy-baby, but she didn't just set and wait for it to happen so she could grieve. She said no. Plain no, just like that, I won't let you sell this boy south on me, even to a good rich family. A rich man's slave is still a slave, ain't he? And down south means he'll be even farther away from where he can run off and make it north. Peggy could feel those feelings in that girl, even as she tossed and moaned in the back of the wagon.

Something more, though. That girl was more a hero than Papa or Po Doggly either one. Because the only way she could think to get away was to use a witchery so strong that Peggy never even heard of it before. Never dreamed that Black folks had such lore. But it was no lie, it was no dream neither. That girl flew. Made a wax poppet and feathered it and burnt it up. Burnt it right up. It let her fly all this way, this long hard way till the sun came up, far enough that Peggy saw her and they took her across the Hio. But what a price that runaway had paid for it.

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When they got back to the roadhouse, Mama was just as angry as Peggy ever saw her. "It's a crime you should have a whipping for, taking your sixteen-year-old daughter out to break the slave law in the darkness."

But Papa didn't answer. He didn't have to, once he carried that girl inside and laid her on the floor before the fire.

"She can't have ate a thing for days. For weeks!" cried Mama. "And her brow is like to burn my hand off just to touch her. Fetch me a pan of water, Horace, to mop her brow, while I het up the broth for her to sip—"

"No, Mama," said Peggy. "Best you find some milk for the baby."

"The baby won't die, and this girl's likely to, don't you tell me my business, I know physicking for *this*, anyway—"

"No, Mama," said Peggy. "She did a witchery with a wax poppet. It's a Black sort of witchery, but she had the know-how and she had the power, being the daughter of a king in Africa. She knew the price and now she can't help but pay."

"Are you saying this girl's bound to die?" asked Mama.

"She made a poppet of herself, Mama, and put it on the fire. It gave her the wings to fly one whole night. But the cost of it is the rest of her life."

Papa looked sick at heart. "Peggy, that's plain crazy. What good would it do her to escape from slavery if she was just going to die? Why not kill herself there and save the trouble?"

Peggy didn't have to answer. The baby she was a-holding started to cry right then, and that was all the answer there was.

"I'll get milk," said Papa. "Christian Larsson's bound to have a gill or so to spare even this time of the night."

Mama stopped him, though. "Think again, Horace," she said. "It's near midnight now. What'll you tell him you need the milk *for*?"

Horace sighed, laughed at his own foolishness. "For a runaway slave-girl's little pickaninny baby." But then he turned red, getting hot with anger. "What a crazy thing this Black girl done," he said. "She came all this way, knowing that she'd die, and now what does she reckon we'll do with a little pickaninny like that? We sure can't take it north and lay it across the Canadian border and let it bawl till some Frenchman comes to take it."

"I reckon she just figures it's better to die free than live slave," said Peggy. "I reckon she just knew that whatever life that baby found here had to be better than what it was there."

The girl lay there before the fire, breathing soft, her eyes closed.

"She's asleep, isn't she?" asked Mama.

"Not dead yet," said Peggy, "but not hearing us."

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"Then I'll tell you plain, this is a bad piece of trouble," said Mama. "We can't have people knowing you bring runaway slaves through here. Word of that would spread so fast we'd have two dozen finders camped here every week of the year, and one of them'd be bound to take a shot at you sometime from ambush."

"Nobody has to know," said Papa.

"What are you going to do, tell folks you happened to trip over her dead body in the woods?"

Peggy wanted to shout at them, She ain't dead yet, so mind how you talk! But the truth was they had to get some things planned, and quick. What if one of the guests woke up in the night and came downstairs? There'd be no keeping this secret then.

"How soon will she die?" Papa asked. "By morning?"

"She'll be dead before sunrise, Papa."

Papa nodded. "Then I better get busy. The girl I can take care of. You women can think of something to do with that pickaninny, I hope."

"Oh, we can, can we?" said Mama.

"Well I know I can't, so you'd better."

"Well then maybe I'll just tell folks it's my own babe."

Papa didn't get mad. Just grinned, he did, and said, "Folks ain't going to believe that even if you dip that boy in cream three times a day."

He went outside and got Po Doggly to help him dig a grave.

"Passing this baby off as born around here ain't such a bad idea," said Mama. "That Black family that lives down in that boggy land—you remember two years back when some slaveowner tried to prove he used to own them? What's their name, Peggy?"

Peggy knew them far better than any other White folks in Hatrack River did; she watched over them the same as everyone else, knew all their children, knew all their names. "They call their name Berry," she said. "Like a noble house, they just keep that family name no matter what job each one of them does."

"Why couldn't we pass this baby off as theirs?"

"They're poor, Mama," said Peggy. "They can't feed another mouth."

"We could help with that," said Mama. "We have extra."

"Just think a minute, Mama, how that'd look. Suddenly the Berrys get them a light-colored baby like this, you *know* he's half-white just to look at him. And then Horace Guester starts bringing gifts down to the Berry house."

Mama's face went red. "What do you know about such things?" she demanded.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Mama, I'm a torch. And you know people would start to talk, you know they would."

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Mama looked at the Black girl lying there. "You got us into a whole lot of trouble, little girl."

The baby started fussing.

Mama stood up and walked to the window, as if she could see out into the night and find some answer writ on the sky. Then, abruptly, she headed for the door, opened it.

"Mama," said Peggy.

"There's more than one way to pluck a goose," said Mama.

Peggy saw what Mama had thought of. If they couldn't take the baby down to the Berry place, they could maybe keep the baby here at the roadhouse and say they were taking care of it for the Berrys cause they were so poor. As long as the Berry family went along with the tale, it would account for a half-Black baby showing up one day. And nobody'd think the baby was Horace's bastard—not if his wife brought it right into the house.

"You realize what you're asking them, don't you?" said Peggy. "Everybody's going to think somebody else has been plowing with Mr. Berry's heifer."

Mama looked so surprised Peggy almost laughed out loud. "I didn't think Blacks cared about such things," she said.

Peggy shook her head. "Mama, the Berrys are just about the best Christians in Hatrack River. They have to be, to keep forgiving the way White folks treat them and their children."

Mama closed the door again and stood inside, leaning on it. "How *do* folks treat their children?"

It was a pertinent question, Peggy knew, and Mama had thought of it only just in time. It was one thing to look at that scrawny fussing little Black baby and say, I'm going to take care of this child and save his life. It was something else again to think of him being five and seven and ten and seventeen years old, a young buck living right there in the house.

"I don't think you have to fret about that," said Little Peggy, "not half so much as how *you* plan to treat this boy. Do you plan to raise him up to be your servant, a lowborn child in your big fine house? If that's so, then this girl died for nothing, she might as well have let them sell him south."

"I never hankered for no slave," said Mama. "Don't you go saying that I did."

"Well, what then? Are you going to treat him as your own son, and stand with him against all comers, the way you would if you'd ever borne a son of your own?"

Peggy watched as Mama thought of that, and suddenly she saw all kinds of new paths open up in Mama's heartfire. A son—that's what this half-White boy could be. And if folks around here looked cross-eyed at

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him on account of him not being all White, they'd have to reckon with Margaret Guester, they would, and it'd be a fearsome day for them, they'd have no terror at the thought of hell, not after what she'd put them through.

Mama hadn't felt such a powerful grim determination in all the years Peggy'd been looking into her heart. It was one of those times when somebody's whole future changed right before her eyes. All the old paths had been pretty much the same; Mama had no choices that would change her life. But now, this dying girl had brought a transformation. Now there were hundreds of new paths open, and all of them had a little boy-child in them, needing her the way her daughter'd never needed her. Set upon by strangers, cruelly treated by the boys of the town, he'd come to her again and again for protection, for teaching, for toughening, the kind of thing that Peggy'd never done.

That's why I disappointed you, wasn't it, Mama? Cause I knew too much, too young. You wanted me to come to you in my confusion, with my questions. But I never had no questions, Mama, cause I knew from childhood up. I knew what it meant to be a woman from the memories in your own head. I knew about married love without you telling me. I never had a tearful night pressed up against your shoulder, crying cause some boy I longed for wouldn't look at me; I never longed for any boy around here. I never did a thing you dreamed your little girl would do, cause I had a torch's knack, and I knew everything and needed nothing that you wanted to give me.

But this half-Black boy, he'll need you no matter what his knack might be. I see down all those paths, that if you take him in, if you raise him up, he'll be more son to you than I ever was your daughter, though your blood is half of mine.

"Daughter," said Mama, "if I go through this door, will it turn out well for the boy? And for us, too?"

"Are you asking me to See for you, Mama?"

"I am, Little Peggy, and I never asked for that before, never on my own behalf."

"Then I'll tell you. If you take him in, and treat him like your own son, you'll never regret doing it."

"What about your papa? Will he treat him right?"

"Don't you know your own husband?" asked Peggy.

Mama walked a step toward her, her hand all clenched up even though she never laid a hand on Peggy. "Don't get fresh with me," she said.

"I'm talking the way I talk when I See," said Peggy. "You come to me as a torch, I talk as a torch to you."

"Then say what you have to say."

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"It's easy enough. If you don't know how your husband will treat this boy, you don't know that man at all."

"So maybe I don't," said Mama. "Maybe I don't know him at all. Or maybe I do, and I want you to tell me if I'm right."

"You're right," said Peggy. "He'll treat him fair, and make him feel loved all the days of his life."

"But will he really love him?"

There wasn't no chance that Peggy'd answer that question. Love wasn't even in the picture for Papa. He'd take care of the boy because he ought to, because he felt a bounden duty, but the boy'd never know the difference, it'd feel like love to him, and it'd be a lot more dependable than love ever was. But to explain that to Mama would mean telling her how Papa did so many things because he felt so bad about his ancient sins, and there'd never be a time in Mama's life when she was ready to hear *that* tale.

So Peggy just looked at Mama and answered her the way she answered other folks who pried too deep into things they didn't really want to know. "That's for him to answer," Peggy said. "All you need to know is that the choice you already made in your heart is a good one. Already just deciding that has changed your life."

"But I haven't even decided yet," said Mama.

In Mama's heart there wasn't a single path left, not a single one, in which she didn't get the Berrys to say it was their boy, and leave him with her to raise.

"Yes you have," said Peggy. "And you're glad of it."

Mama turned and left, closing the door gentle behind her, so as not to wake the traveling preacher who was sleeping in the room upstairs of the door.

The Black girl was awake, her eyes open. The baby was still mewling. Without the girl saying a thing, Peggy knew she was willing for the babe to suckle, if she had anything in her breasts to suck on out. The girl hadn't even strength to open up her faded cotton shirt. Peggy had to sit beside her cradling the child against her own thighs while she fumbled the girl's buttons open with her free hand. The girl's chest was so skinny, her ribs so stark and bare, that her breasts looked to be saddlebags tossed onto a rail fence. But the nipple still stood up for the baby to suck, and a white froth soon appeared around the baby's lips, so there was something there, even now, even at the very end of his mama's life.

The girl was far too weak to talk, but she didn't need to; Peggy heard what she wanted to say, and answered her. "My own mama's going to keep your boy," said Peggy. "And no wise is she going to let any man make a slave of him."

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That was what the girl wanted most to hear—that and the sound of her greedy boy-baby slurping and humming and squealing at her breast.

But Peggy wanted her to know more than that before she died. "Your boy-baby's going to know about you," she told the girl. "He's going to hear how you gave your life so you could fly away and take him here to freedom. Don't you think he'll ever forget you, cause he won't."

Then Peggy looked into the child's heartfire, searched there for what he'd be. Oh, that was a painful thing, because the life of a half-White boy in a White town was hard no matter which of the paths of his life he chose. Still, she saw enough to know the nature of the babe whose fingers scratched and clutched at his mama's naked chest. "And he'll be a man worth dying for, too, I promise you that."

The girl was glad to hear it. It brought her peace enough that she could sleep again. After a time the babe, satisfied, also fell asleep. Peggy picked him up, wrapped him in a blanket, and laid him in the crook of his mama's arm. Every last moment of your mama's life you'll be with her, she told the boychild silently. We'll tell you that, too, that she held you in her arms when she died.

When she died, Papa was out with Po Doggly, digging her grave; Mama was off at the Berrys, to persuade them to help her save the baby's life and freedom; and here was Peggy, thinking as if the girl was already dead.

But she wasn't dead, not yet. And all of a sudden it came to Peggy, with a flash of anger that she was too stupid to think of it before, that there was one soul she knew of who had the knack in him to heal the sick. Hadn't he knelt by Ta-Kumsaw at the battle of Detroit, that great Red man's body riddled with bullet holes, hadn't Alvin knelt there and healed him up? Alvin could save this girl, if he was here.

She cast off in the darkness, searching for the heartfire that burned so bright, the heartfire she knew better than any in the world, better even than her own. And there he was, running in the darkness, traveling the way Red men did, like he was asleep, and the land around him was his soul. He was coming faster than any White could ever come, even with the fastest horse on the best road between the Wobbish and the Hatrack, but he wouldn't be here till noon tomorrow, and by then this runaway slavegirl would be dead and in the ground up in the family graveyard. By twelve hours at most she'd miss the one man in this country who could have saved her life.

Wasn't that the way of it? Alvin could save her, but he'd never know she needed saving. While Peggy, who couldn't do a thing, she knew all that was happening, knew all the things that might happen, knew the one thing that *should* happen if the world was good. It wasn't good. It wouldn't happen.

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What a terrible gift it was, to be a torch, to know all these things a-coming, and have so little power to change them. The only power she'd ever had was just the words of her mouth, telling folks, and even then she couldn't be sure what they'd choose to do. Always there'd be some choice they could make that would set them down a path even worse than the one she wanted to save them from—and so many times in their wickedness or cantankerousness or just plain bad luck, they'd make that terrible choice and then things'd be worse for them than if Peggy'd just kept still and never said a thing. I wish I didn't know. I wish I had some hope that Alvin would come in time. I wish I had some hope this girl would live. I wish that I could save her life myself.

And then she thought of the many times she *had* saved a life. Alvin's life, using Alvin's caul. At that moment hope *did* spark up in her heart, for surely, just this once, she could use a bit of the last scrap of Alvin's caul to save this girl, to restore her.

Peggy leapt up and ran clumsily to the stairs, her legs so numb from sitting on the floor that she couldn't hardly feel her own footsteps on the bare wood. She tripped on the stairs and made some noise, but none of the guests woke up as far as she noticed right off like that. Up the stairs, then up the attic ladderway that Oldpappy made into a proper stairway not three months afore he died. She threaded her way among the trunks and old furniture until she reached her room up against the west end of the house. Moonlight came in through her south-facing window, making a squared-off pattern on the floor. She pried up the floorboard and took the box from the place where she hid it whenever she left the room.

She walked too heavy or this one guest slept too light, but as she came down the ladderway, there he stood, skinny white legs sticking out from under his longshirt, a-gazing down the stairs, then back toward his room, like as if he couldn't make up his mind whether to go in or out, up or down. Peggy looked into his heartfire, just to find out whether he'd been downstairs and seen the girl and her baby—if he had, then all their thought and caution had been in vain.

But he hadn't—it was still possible.

"Why are you still dressed for going out?" he asked. "At this time of the morning, too?"

She gently laid her finger against his lips. To silence him, or at least that's how the gesture began. But she knew right away that she was the first woman ever to touch this man upon the face since his mama all those many years ago. She saw that in that moment his heart filled, not with lust, but with the vague longings of a lonely man. He was the minister who'd come day before yesterday morning, a traveling preacher—from Scotland, he said. She'd hardly paid him no mind, her being so preoccupied with knowing Alvin was on his way back. But now

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all that mattered was to send him back into his room, quick as could be, and she knew one sure way to do it. She put her hands on his shoulders, getting a strong grip behind his neck, and pulled him down to where she could kiss him fair on the lips. A good long buss, like he never had from a woman in all his days.

Just like she expected, he was back into his room almost before she let go of him. She was halfway down the stairs when she heard the bar fall into place across the door. Peggy didn't even have time to care whether she caused him undue misery. All she cared for now was to get the caul down to where she could use it to help the runaway, if by any chance Alvin's power was really hers to use. So much time that minister had cost her. So many of the slavegirl's precious breaths.

She was still breathing, wasn't she? Yes. No. The babe lay sleeping beside her, but her chest didn't move even as much as him, her lips didn't make even so much as a baby's breath on Peggy's hand. But her heartfire still burned! Peggy could see that plain enough, still burned bright because she was so strong-hearted, that slavegirl was. So Peggy opened up the box, took out the scrap of caul, and rubbed a dry corner of it to dust between her fingers, whispering to her, "Live, get strong." She tried to do what Alvin did when he healed, the way he could feel the broken places in a person's body, set them right. Hadn't she watched him as he did it so many times before? But it was different, doing it herself. It was strange to her, she didn't have the vision for it, and she could feel the life ebbing away from the girl's body, the heart stilled, the lungs slack, the eyes open but unlighted, and at last the heartfire flashed like a shooting star, all sudden and bright, and it was gone.

Too late. If I hadn't stopped in the hall upstairs, hadn't had to deal with the minister—

But no, no, she couldn't blame herself, it wasn't her power anyway, it was too late before she began. The girl had been dying all through her body. Even Alvin himself, if he were here, even he couldn't have done it. It was never more than a slim hope. Never even hope enough that she could see a single pathway where it worked. So she wouldn't do like so many did, she wouldn't endlessly blame herself when after all she'd done her best at a task that had little hope in it from the start.

Now that the girl was dead, she couldn't leave the baby there to feel his mama's arm grow cold. She picked him up. He stirred, but slept on in the way that babies do. Your mama's dead, little half-White boy, but you'll have *my* mama, and my papa too. They got love enough for a little one; you won't starve for it like some children I seen. So you make the best of it, boy-baby. Your mama died to bring you here—you make the best of it, and you'll be something, right enough.

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You'll be something, she heard herself whispering. You'll be something, and so will I.

She made her decision even before she realized there was even a decision to be made. She could feel her own future changing even though she couldn't see rightly what it was going to be.

That slavegirl had guessed at the likeliest future—you don't have to be a torch to see *some* things plain. It was an ugly life ahead, losing her baby, living as a slave till the day she dropped. Yet she saw just the faintest glimmer of hope for her baby, and once she saw it, she didn't hold back, no sir, that glimmer was worth paying her life for.

And now look at me, thought Peggy. Here I look down the paths of Alvin's life and see misery for myself—nowhere near as bad as that slavegirl's, but bad enough. Now and then I catch the shine of a bright chance for happiness, a strange and backward way to have Alvin and have him love me, too. Once I seen it, am I going to sit on my hands and watch that bright hope die, just because I'm not sure how to get to it from here?

If that beat-down child can make her own hope out of wax and ash and feathers and a bit of herself, then I can make my own life, too. Somewhere there's a thread that if I just lay hold on it, it'll lead me to happiness. And even if I never find that particular thread, it'll be better than the despair waiting for me if I stay. Even if I never become a part of Alvin's life when he comes to manhood, well, that's still not as steep a price as that slavegirl paid for freedom.

When Alvin comes tomorrow, I won't be here.

That was her decision, just like that. Why, she could hardly believe she never thought of it before. Of all people in the whole of Hatrack River, she ought to have knowed that there's *always* another choice. Folks talked on about how they were forced into misery and woe, they didn't have no choice at all—but that runaway girl showed that there's always a way out, long as you remember even death can be a straight smooth road sometimes.

I don't even have to get no blackbird feathers to fly, neither.

Peggy sat there holding the baby, making bold and fearsome plans for how she'd leave in the morning afore Alvin could arrive. Whenever she felt a-scared of what she'd set herself to do, she cast her gaze down on that girl, and the sight of her was comfort, it truly was. I might someday end up like you, runaway girl, dead in some stranger's house. But better that unknown future than one I knew all along I'd hate, and then did nothing to avoid.

Will I do it, will I really do it in the morning, when the time's come and no turning back? She touched Alvin's caul with her free hand, just snaking her fingers into the box, and what she saw in Alvin's future

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made her feel like singing. Used to be most paths showed them meeting up and starting out her life of misery. Now only a few of those paths were there—in most of Alvin's futures, she saw him come to Hatrack River and search for the torch girl and find her gone. Just changing her mind tonight had closed down most of the roads to misery.

Mama came back with the Berrys before Papa came in from grave-digging. Anga Berry was a heavyset woman with laughter lines outnumbering the lines of worry on her face, though both kinds were plain enough. Peggy knew her well and liked her better than most folks in Hatrack River. She had a temper but she also had compassion, and Peggy wasn't surprised at all to see her rush to the body of the girl and take up that cold limp hand and press it to her bosom. She murmured words almost like a lullaby, her voice was so low and sweet and kind.

"She's dead," said Mock Berry. "But that baby's strong, I see."

Peggy stood up and let Mock see the baby in her arms. She didn't like him half so well as she liked his wife. He was the kind of man who'd slap a child so hard blood flowed, just cause he didn't like what was said or done. It was almost worse cause he didn't rage when he did it. Like he felt nothing at all, to hurt somebody or not hurt somebody made no powerful difference in his mind. But he worked hard, and even though he was poor his family got by; and nobody who knew Mock paid heed to them crude folks what said there wasn't a buck who wouldn't steal or a ewe you couldn't tup.

"Healthy," said Mock. Then he turned to Mama. "When he grow up to be a big old buck, ma'am, you still aim to call him your boy? Or you make him sleep out back in the shed with the animals?"

Well, he wasn't one to pussyfoot around the issue, Peggy saw.

"Shut your mouth, Mock," said his wife. "And you give me that baby, Miss. I just wish I'd knowed he was coming or I'd've kept my youngest on the tit to keep the milk in. Weaned that boy two months back and he's been nothing but trouble since, but you ain't no trouble, baby, you ain't no trouble at all." She cooed to the baby just like she cooed to his dead mama, and he didn't wake up either.

"I told you. I'll raise him as my son," said Mama.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I just never heard of no White woman doing such a thing," said Mock.

"What I say," said Mama, "that's what I do."

Mock thought on that a moment. Then he nodded. "I reckon so," he said. "I reckon I never heard you break your word, not even to Black folks." He grinned. "Most White folk allow as how lying to a buck ain't the same as *lying*."

"We'll do like you asked," said Anga Berry. "I'll tell anybody who ask me this is my boy, only we gave him to you cause we was too poor."

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"But don't you ever go forgetting that it's a lie," said Mock. "Don't you ever go thinking that if it really was our own baby, we'd ever give him up. And don't you ever go thinking that my wife here ever would let some White man put a baby in her, and her being married to me."

Mama studied Mock for a minute, taking his measure in the way she had. "Mock Berry, I hope you come and visit me any day you like while this boy is in my house, and I'll show you how one White woman keeps her word."

Mock laughed. "I reckon you a regular Mancipationist."

Papa came in then, covered with sweat and dirt. He shook hands with the Berrys, and in a minute they told him the tale they all would tell. He made his promises too, to raise the boy like his own son. He even thought of what never entered Mama's head—he said a few words to Peggy, to promise her that they wouldn't give no preference to the boy, neither. Peggy nodded. She didn't want to say much, cause anything she said would either be a lie or give her plans away; she knew she had no intention to be in this house for even a single day of this baby's future here.

"We go on home now, Mrs. Guester," said Anga. She handed the baby to Mama. "If one of my children wake up with a boogly dream I best be there or you hear them screams clear up here on the high road."

"Ain't you going have no preacher say words at her grave?" said Mock.

Papa hadn't thought of it. "We do have a minister upstairs," he said.

But Peggy didn't let him hold that thought for even a moment. "No," she said, sharp as she could.

Papa looked at her, and knew that she was talking as a torch. Wasn't no arguing that point. He just nodded. "Not this time, Mock," he said. "Wouldn't be safe."

Mama fretted Anga Berry clear to the door. "Is there anything I ought to know?" said Mama. "Is there anything different about Black babies?"

"Oh, powerful different," said Anga. "But that baby, he half White, I reckon, so you just take care of that White half, and I reckon the Black half take care of hisself."

"Cow's milk from a pig bladder?" Mama insisted.

"You know all them things," said Anga. "I learnt everything I know from you, Mrs. Guester. All the women round here do. How come you asking me now? Don't you know I need my sleep?"

Once the Berrys were gone, Papa picked up the girl's body and carried her outside. Not even a coffin, though they would overlay the corpse with stones to keep the dogs off. "Light as a feather," he said when first he hoisted her. "Like the charred carcass of a burnt log."

Which was apt enough, Peggy had to admit. That's what she was now. Just ashes. She'd burnt herself right up.

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Mama held the pickaninny boy while Peggy went up into the attic and fetched down the cradle. Nobody woke up this time, except that minister. He was *wide* awake behind his door, but he wasn't coming out for any reason. Mama and Peggy made up that little bed in Mama's and Papa's room, and laid the baby in it. "Tell me if this poor orphan baby's got him a name," said Mama.

"She never gave him one," said Peggy. "In her tribe, a woman never got her a name till she married, and a man had no name till he killed him his first animal."

"That's just awful," said Mama. "That ain't even Christian. Why, she died unbaptized."

"No," said Peggy. "She was baptized right enough. Her owner's wife saw to that—all the Blacks on their plantation were baptized."

Mama's face went sour. "I'll have a name for you, little boy." She grinned wickedly. "What do you think your papa would do if I named this baby Horace Guester Junior?"

"Die," said Peggy.

"I reckon so," said Mama. "I ain't ready to be a widow yet. So for now we'll name him—oh, I can't think, Peggy. What's a Black man's name? Or should I just name him like any White child?"

"Only Black man's name I know is Othello," said Peggy.

"That's a queer name if I ever heard one," said Mama. "You must've got that out of one of Whitley Physicker's books."

Peggy said nothing.

"I know," said Mama. "I know his name. Cromwell. The Lord Protector's name."

"You might better name him Arthur, after the king," said Peggy.

Mama just cackled and laughed at that. "That's your name, little boy. Arthur Stuart! And if the king don't like such a namesake, let him send an army and I still won't change it. His Majesty will have to change his own name first."

Even though she got to bed so late, Peggy woke early next morning. It was hoofbeats woke her—she didn't have to go to the window to recognize his heartfire as the minister drove away. Such an odd thing, that her lips could burn so on his, and yet his lips left her own so cold.

It was the north-facing window she looked out of. She could see between the trees to the graveyard up the hill. She tried to see where the grave was dug last night, but there wasn't no sign her natural eyes could see, and in a graveyard there wasn't no heartfires neither, nothing to help her. Alvin will see it though, she knew that sure. He'd head for that graveyard first thing he did, cause his oldest brother's body lay there, the boy Vigor, who got swept away in the Hatrack River saving Alvin's

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mother's life in the last hour before she gave birth to her seventh son. But Vigor hung on to life just long enough, in spite of the river's strongest pulling at him, hung on just long enough that when Alvin was born he was the seventh of seven living sons. Peggy herself had watched his heartfire flicker and die right after the babe was born. He would've heard that story a thousand times. So he'd come to that graveyard, and *he* could feel his way through the earth and find what lay hidden there. He'd find that unmarked grave, that wasted body so fresh buried there.

Peggy took the box with the caul in it, put it deep in a cloth bag along with her second dress, a petticoat, and the most recent books Whitley Physicker had brought. Just because she didn't want to meet him face to face didn't mean she could forget that boy. She'd touch the caul again tonight, or maybe not till morning, and then she'd stand with him in memory and use his senses to find that nameless Black girl's grave.

Her bag packed, she went downstairs.

Mama had drug the cradle into the kitchen and she was singing to the baby while she kneaded bread, rocking the cradle with one foot, even though Arthur Stuart was fast asleep. Peggy set her bag outside the kitchen door, walked in and touched Mama's shoulder. She hoped a little that she'd see her Mama grieving something awful when she found out Peggy'd gone off. But it wasn't so. Oh, she'd carry on and rage at first, but in the times to come she'd miss Peggy less than she might've guessed. It was the baby'd take her mind off worrying about her daughter. Besides, Mama knew Peggy could take care of herself. Mama knew Peggy wasn't a one to need to hold a body's hand. While Arthur Stuart needed her.

If this was the first time Peggy noticed how her Mama felt about her, she'd have been hurt deep. But it was the hundredth time, and she was used to it, and looked behind it to the reason, and loved her Mama for being a better soul than most, and forgave her for not loving Peggy more.

"I love you, Mama," said Peggy.

"I love you too, baby," said Mama. She didn't even look up nor guess what Peggy had in mind.

Papa was still asleep. After all, he dug a grave last night and filled it too.

Peggy wrote a note. Sometimes she took care to put in a lot of extra letters in the fancy way they did in books, but this time she wanted to make sure Papa could read it for hisself. That meant putting in no more letters than it took to make the sounds for reading out loud.

> I lov you Papa and Mama but I got to
> leav I no its rong to leav Hatrak
> with out no torch but I bin torch sixtn yr. I seen my
> fewchr and ile be saf donte you fret on my acown.

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She walked out the front door, carried her bag to the road, and waited only ten minutes before Doctor Whitley Physicker came along in his carriage, bound on the first leg of a trip to Philadelphia.

"You didn't wait on the road like this just to hand me back that Milton I lent you," said Whitley Physicker.

She smiled and shook her head. "No, sir, I'd like you take me with you to Dekane. I plan to visit with a friend of my father's, but if you don't mind the company I'd rather not spend the money for a coach."

Peggy watched him consider for a minute, but she knew he'd let her come, and without asking her folks, neither. He was the kind of man thought a girl had as much worth as any boy, and more than that, he plain liked Peggy, thought of her as something like a niece. And he knew that Peggy never lied, so he had no need to check with her folks.

And she hadn't lied to him, no more than she ever lied when she left off without telling all she knew. Papa's old lover, the woman he dreamed of and suffered for, she lived there in Dekane. Peggy knew that lady well, from watching far off for all these years. If I knock on her door, thought Peggy, I don't even have to tell her I'm Horace Guester's girl, she'd take me in as a stranger, she would, and care for me, and help me on my way. But maybe I *will* tell her whose daughter I am, and how I knew to come to her, and how Papa still lives with the aching memory of his love for her.

The carriage rattled over the covered bridge that Alvin's father and older brothers had built eleven years before, after the river drowned the eldest son. Birds nested in the rafters. It was a mad, musical, happy sound they made, at least to her ears, chirping so loud inside the bridge that it sounded like she imagined grand opera ought to be. They had opera in Camelot, down south. Maybe someday she'd go and hear it, and see the king himself in his box.

Or maybe not. Because someday she might just find the path that led to that brief but lovely dream, and then she'd have more important things to do than look at kings or hear the music of the Austrian court played by lacy Virginia musicians in the fancy opera hall in Camelot. Alvin was more important than any of these, if he could only find his way to all his power and what he ought to do with it. And she was born to be part of it. That's how easily she slipped into her dreams of him. Yet why not? Her dreams of him, however brief and hard to find, were true visions of the future, and the greatest joy and the greatest grief she could find for herself both touched this boy who wasn't even a man yet, who had never seen her face to face.

But sitting there in the carriage beside Doctor Whitley Physicker, she forced those thoughts, those visions from her mind. What comes will come, she thought. If I find that path I find it, and if not, then not. For

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now, at least, I'm free. Free of my watch aloft for the town of Hatrack, and free of building all my plans around that little boy. And what if I end up free of him forever? What if I find another future that doesn't even have him in it? That's the likeliest end of things. In time maybe I'll even forget that scrap of a dream I had, and find my own good road to a peaceful end, instead of bending myself to fit with his troubled path.

The dancing horses pulled the carriage along so brisk that the wind caught and tossed her hair. She closed her eyes and pretended she was flying, a runaway just learning to be free.

Let him find his path to greatness now without me. Let me have a happy life far from him. Let some other woman stand beside him in his glory. Let another woman kneel a-weeping at his grave. ●

—Sycamore Hill, August 1986

Excavations in Mangala Valles

Raw fury must have moved these Martian tons.
The lost expedition is marked with flags in a
clutch at the base of a squat outcropping,
itself buried under the mass wasting slide.
Their suits are pitted and visors shattered.

We brush at these helmets, now exposed as
Protoceratops eggs are upon the Gobi flats.

Dust sifts across their mummified cheeks,
brighter than the rouge we paint ourselves with
on frenzied lonely nights trapped like
bad air under the Tharsis domes.

—Robert Frazier

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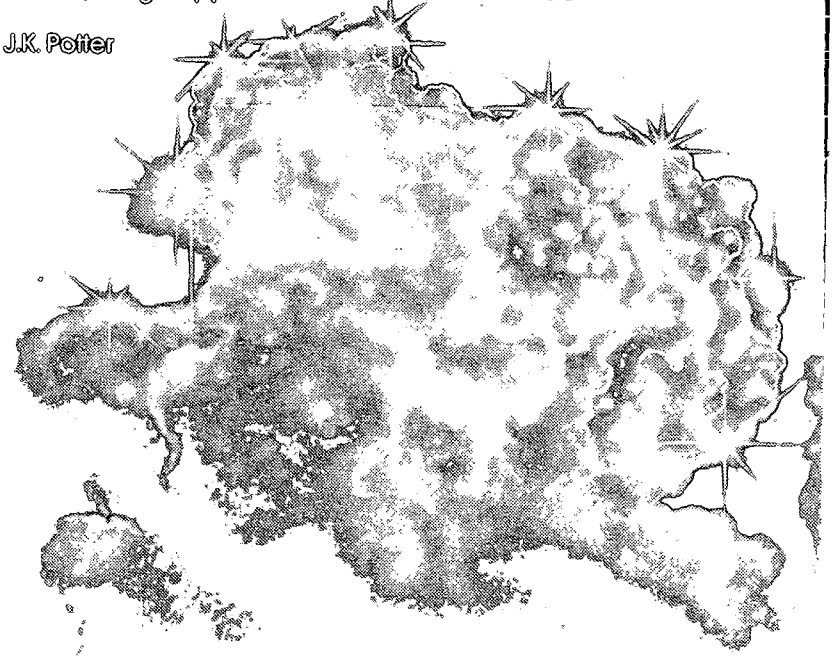
GLASS CLOUD

The author tells us he can remember the exact moment he started working on "Glass Cloud." It was just before lunchtime on May 29, 1977. Mr. Kelly and his wife had climbed the same trail as his character, Phillip Wing, and, "... as we rested on the summit of Mt. Webster, and I looked down into Crawford Notch, the Glass Cloud popped into my head. I carried the Cloud around for years, waiting for a character to give it meaning. Late last winter, Wing stepped forward to claim it for his own."

art: J.K. Potter



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by James Patrick Kelly

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Phillip Wing was surprised when he found out what his wife had been doing with her Wednesday afternoons. "You've joined what?"

"A friend invited me to sit in on a study group at the mission." Daisy refilled her glass from a decanter. "I've been twice, that's all. I haven't joined anything."

"What are you studying?"

"Sitting in, Phil—it's not like I intend to convert. I'm just browsing." She sipped her wine and waited for Wing to settle back. "They haven't said a word about immortality yet. Mostly they talk about history."

"History? History? The Messengers haven't been here long enough to learn anything about history."

"Seven years. First contact was seven years ago." She sighed and suddenly she was lecturing. "Cultural evolution follows predictable patterns. There are interesting correlations between humanity and some of the other species that the Messengers have contacted."

Wing shook his head. "I don't get it. We've been together what? Since '51? For years all that mattered was the inn. They nuke Geneva, so what? Revolution in Mexico, who cares?"

"I care about you," she said.

That stopped him for a moment. Absently, he filled his glass from the decanter and took a gulp before he realized that it was the synthetic Riesling that she was trying out as a house wine. He swallowed it with difficulty. "Who's the friend?"

"What?"

"The friend who asked you to the mission. Who is he?" Wing was just guessing that it was a man. It was a good guess.

"A regular." Daisy glanced away from him and nodded at the glow sculpture on the wall. "You know Jim McCauley."

All he knew was that McCauley was a local artist who had made a name for himself in fancy light bulbs. Wing watched the play of pastel light across her face, trying to see her as this regular might see her. Daisy was not beautiful, although she could be pretty when she paid attention to detail. She did not bother to comb her hair every time the wind caught it nor did she much care about the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. Hers was an intelligent, hard-edged, New Hampshire Yankee face. She looked like someone who would know about things that mattered. Wing had good reasons for loving her; he slid across the couch and nuzzled under her ear.

"Don't tickle." She laughed. "You're invited, you know." She pulled back, but not too far. "The new Messenger, Ndavu, is interested in art. He's mentioned the Glass Cloud several times. You really ought to go. You might learn something." Having made her pitch, she kissed him.

* * *

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Phillip Wing had no time to study history; he was too busy worrying about the Second Wonder of the World. Solon Petropolus, erratic scion of the Greek transportation conglomerate, had endowed the Seven Wonders Foundation with an immense fortune. The foundation was Petropolus's megalomaniacal gift to the ages. It commissioned constructions —some called them art—on a monumental scale. It was the vulgar purpose of the Wonders to attract crowds. They were to be places where a French *secretaire* or a Peruvian *campesino* or even an Algerian *mullah* might come to contemplate the enduring spirit of Solon Petropolus, the man who embalmed himself in money.

Wing had spent five years at Yale grinding out a practitioner's degree but when he graduated he was certain that he had made a mistake. He was offered several jobs but not one that he wanted. He had studied architecture with the impossibly naïve hope that someday, someone would let him design a building as large as his ambitions. He wanted to build landmarks, not program factories to fabricate this year's model of go-tubes for the masses too poor to afford real housing. Instead of working he decided to spend the summer after graduation hiking the Appalachian Trail. Alone.

As he climbed Webster Cliff in Crawford Notch, he played a poetry game against his fatigue. *A zephyr massages the arthritic tree.* It was only a few kilometers to the Appalachian Mountain Club's Mispah Spring Hut where he would spend the night. *Plodding promiscuously into a tangerine heaven.* Wing made it a game because he did not really believe in poetry. *Stone teeth bite solipsistic toes.* A low cloud was sweeping through the Notch just as the late afternoon sun dipped out of the overcast into a jagged band of blue sky on the horizon. Something strange happened to the light then and for an instant the cloud was transformed. *A cloud of glass.*

"A glass cloud," he muttered. There was no one to hear him. He stopped, watching the cloud but not seeing it, experiencing instead an overpowering inner vision. A glass cloud. The image swelled like a bubble. He could see himself floating with it and for the first time he understood what people meant when they talked about inspiration. He kept thinking of the glass cloud all the way to the hut, all that night. He was still thinking of it weeks later when he reached the summit of Kahtadin, the northern terminus of the trail, and thought of it on the hover to Connecticut. He did some research and made sketches, taking a strange satisfaction from the enormous uselessness of it. That fall Seven Wonders announced the opening of the North American design competition. Phillip Wing, an unregistered, unemployed, uncertain architect of twenty-seven had committed the single inspiration of his life to disk and entered the competition because he had nothing better to do.

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Now as he looked down out of the hover at Crawford Notch, Wing could not help but envy that young man stalking through the forest, seething with ambition and, at the same time, desperately afraid he was second-rate. At age twenty-seven Wing could not imagine the trouble a thirty-five-year old could get into. Schedules and meetings, compromises and contracts. That eager young man had not realized what it would mean to capture the glittering prize at the start of a career, so that everything that came after seemed lackluster. That fierce young man had never been truly in love or watched in horror as time abraded true love.

A roadbuster was eating the section of NH Route 302 that passed through the Notch. Its blades flayed the ice-slicked asphalt into chunks. Then a wide-bladed caterpillar scooped the bituminous rubble up and into trucks bound for the recycling plant in Concord. Once the old highway had been stripped down to its foundation course of gravel, crews would come to lay the Glass Cloud's underground track. After thaw a paver the size of a brachiosaurus would regurgitate asphalt to cover the track. Route 302 through Crawford Notch was the last phase of the ninety-seven kilometer track which followed existing roads through the heart of the White Mountain National Forest.

"Won't be long now," said the hover pilot. "They're talking a power-up test in ten weeks. Three months tops."

Wing said nothing. Ten weeks. Unless another preservationist judge could be convinced to meddle or Seven Wonders decided it had spent enough and sued him for the overruns. The project was two years late already and had long since gobbled up a generous contingency budget. Wing knew he had made mistakes, although he admitted them only to himself. Sometimes he worried that he had wasted his chance. He motioned to the pilot who banked the hover and headed south toward North Conway.

The hover was the property of Gemini Fabricators, the lead company in the consortium that had won the contract to build the Cloud and its track. Wing knew that the pilot had instructions to keep him in the air as long as possible. Every minute he spent inspecting track was one minute less he would have to go over the checklist for the newly completed docking platform with Laporte and Alz. Laporte, the project manager, made no secret of his dismay at having to waste valuable time with Wing. Laporte had made it clear that he believed Wing was largely to blame for the project's misfortunes.

The hover settled onto its landing struts like an old man easing into a hot bath. Wing waited for the dirty snow and swirls of litter to subside. The job site was strewn with coffee cups, squashed beer bulbs, and enough vitabulk wrap to cover Mount Washington.

Wing popped the hatch and was greeted by a knife-edged wind; there

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was no welcoming committee. He crossed the frozen landing zone toward the field offices, a group of linked commercial go-tubes that looked like a chain of plastic sausages some careless giant had dropped. The Seven Wonders tube was empty and the telelink was ringing. Wing would have answered it except that was exactly the kind of thing that made Laporte mad. Instead he went next door to Gemini looking for Fred Alz. Wing suspected that some of the project's problems arose from the collusion between Laporte and Alz, Gemini's field super. A woman he did not recognize sat at a CAD screen eating a vitabulk doughnut and staring dully at details of the ferroplastic structural grid.

"Where is everybody?" said Wing.

"They went to town to see him off."

"Him?"

"I think it's a him. A Messenger: No-doubt or some such."

"What was he doing here?"

"Maybe he was looking for converts. With immortality we might actually have a chance of finishing." She took a bite of doughnut and looked at him for the first time. "Who the hell are you anyway?"

"The architect."

"Yeah?" She did not seem impressed. "Where's your hard hat?"

Wing knew what they all said about him: that he was an arrogant son-of-a-bitch with a chip on his shoulder the size of the Great Pyramid. He spent some time living up to his reputation. The engineer did not stay for the entire tirade; she stalked out, leaving Wing to stew over the waste of an afternoon. Shortly afterward, Alz and Laporte breezed in, laughing. Probably at him.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Phil," Laporte held up both hands in mock surrender, "but there's good news."

"It's two-thirty-eight! This plugging project is twenty-one months late and you're giving tours to goddamned aliens."

"Phil." Alz put a hand on his shoulder. "Phil, listen to me for a minute, will you?" Wing wanted to knock it away. "Mentor Ndavu has made a generous offer on behalf of the commonwealth of Messengers." Alz spoke quickly, as if he thought Wing might explode if he stopped. "He's talking major funding, a special grant that could carry us right through to completion. He says the Messengers want to recognize outstanding achievement in the arts, hard cash and lots of it—you ought to be proud is what you ought to be. We get it and chances are we can float the Cloud out of here by Memorial Day. Ten weeks, Phil."

Wing looked from Alz to Laporte. There was something going on, something peculiar and scary. People did not just hand out open-ended grants to rescue troubled projects for no reason—especially not the Messengers, who had never shown more than a polite interest in any of the works of

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humanity. Three years of autotherapy had taught Wing that he had a tendency to make conspiracy out of coincidence. But this was real. First Daisy, now the Cloud; the aliens were getting close. "Could we do it without them?"

Alz laughed.

"They're not monsters, Phil," said Laporte.

A tear dribbled down Wing's cheek. His eyes always watered when he sniffed too much Focus. The two-meter CAD screen that filled one wall of his studio displayed the south elevation of the proposed headquarters for SEE-Coast, the local telelink utility. There was something wrong with the row of window dormers set into the new hip roof. He blinked and the computer replaced the sketch with a menu. A doubleblink changed the cursor on the screen from draw to erase mode. His eyes darted; the windows disappeared.

He had known that the SEE-Coast project was going to be more trouble than it was worth. Jack Congemi was trying to cram too much building onto too small a site, a sliver of river front wedged between an eighteenth-century chandlery and a nineteenth-century hotel. If he could have gotten a variance to build higher than five stories, there would have been no problem. But SEE-Coast was buying into Portsmouth's exclusive historic district, where the zoning regulations were carved in granite.

It was a decent commission and the cost-plus fee contract meant he would make good money, but like everything he had done since the Cloud, Wing was bored with it. The building was pure kitsch: a tech bunker hiding behind a Georgian facade. It was like all the rest of his recent projects: clients buying a safe name brand and to hell with the vision. Of course they expected him to deliver stick-built at a price competitive with Korean robot factories. Never mind that half the local trades were incompetent and the other half were booked.

At last he could no longer bear to look at the monster. "Save it." He closed his eyes and still saw those ugly windows burned on the insides of his lids.

"Saved," said the computer.

He sat, too weary to move, and let his mind soak in the blackness of the empty screen. He knew he had spent too much time recently worrying about the Cloud and the Messengers. It was perverse since everything was going so well. All the checklists were now complete, pre-flight start-up tests were underway and Seven Wonders had scheduled dedication ceremonies for Memorial Day. The opening of the Second Wonder of the Modern World would have been reason enough for a news orgy, but now the Messengers' involvement was beginning to overshadow Wing's masterpiece. Telelink reporters kept calling him from places like Bangkok

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and Kinshasa and Montevideo to ask him about the aliens. Why were they supporting the Cloud? When would they invite humanity to join their commonwealth and share in their immortality technology? What were they really like?

He had no answers. Up until now he had done his best to avoid meeting the alien, Ndavu. Like most intelligent people, Wing had been bitterly disappointed by the Messengers. Their arrival had changed nothing: there were still too many crazy people with nukes; the war in Mexico dragged on. Although they had been excruciatingly diplomatic, it was clear that human civilization impressed them not at all. They kept their secrets to themselves—had never invited anyone to tour their starships or demonstrated the technique for preserving minds after death. The Messengers, claimed that they had come to Earth for raw materials and to spread some as-yet vague message of galactic culture. Wing guessed that they held humanity in roughly the same esteem with which the conquistadors had held the Aztecs. But he could hardly admit that to reporters.

"Something else?" The computer disturbed his reverie; it was set to prompt him for new commands after twenty minutes of inactivity.

He leaned back in his chair and stretched, accidentally knocking his print of da Vinci's *John the Baptist* askew. "What the hell time is it, anyway?"

"One-fourteen-thirty-five AM, 19 February 2056."

He decided that he was too tired to get up and fix the picture.

"Here you are." Daisy appeared in the doorway. "Do you know what time it is?" She straightened the Baptist and then came up behind his chair. "Something wrong?"

"SEE-Coast."

She began to massage his shoulders and he leaned his head back against her belly. "Can't it wait until the morning?"

The skin was itchy where the tear had dried. Wing rubbed it, considering.

"Would you like to come to bed?" She bent over to kiss him and he could see that she was naked beneath her dressing gown. "All work and no play . . . "

The stink of doubt that he had tried so hard to perfume with concentration enhancers still clung to him. "But what if I wake up tomorrow and can't work on this crap? What if I don't believe in what I'm doing anymore? I can't live off the Glass Cloud forever."

"Then you'll find something else." She sifted his hair through her fingers.

He plastered a smile on his face and slipped a hand inside her gown—more from habit than passion. "I love you."

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"It's better in bed." She pulled him from his chair. "Just you keep quiet and follow Mother Goodwin, young man. She'll take the wrinkles out of your brow."

He stumbled as he came into her arms but she caught his weight easily. She gave him a fierce hug and he wondered what she had been doing all evening.

"I've been thinking," he said softly, "about this party. I give in: go ahead if you want and invite Ndavu. I promise to be polite—but that's all." He wanted to pull back and see her reaction but she would not let him go. "That's what you want, isn't it?"

"That's one of the things I want," she said. Her cheek was hot against his neck.

Piscataqua House was built by Samuel Goodwin in 1763. A handsome building of water-struck brick and granite, it was said to have offered the finest lodging in the colonial city of Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Nearly three hundred years later it was still an inn and Daisy Goodwin was its keeper.

Wing had always been intrigued by the way Daisy's pedigree had affected her personality. It was not so much the old money she had inherited—most of which was tied up in the inn. It was the way she could bicycle around town and point out the elementary school she had attended, the Congregational Church where her grandparents had married, the huge black oak in Prescott Park that great-great-Uncle Josiah had planted during the Garfield administration. She lived with the easy grace of someone who was exactly where she belonged, doing exactly what she had always intended to do.

Wing had never belonged. He had been born in Taipei but had fled to the States with his Taiwanese father after his American mother had been killed in the bloody reunification riots of 2026. His father, a software engineer, had spent the rest of a bitter life searching in vain for what he had left on Taiwan. Philip Wing had gone to elementary schools in Cupertino, California; Waltham, Massachusetts; Norcross, Georgia; and Orem, Utah. He knew very little about either side of his family. "When you are old enough to understand," his father would always say. "Someday we will talk. But not now." Young Philip learned quickly to stop asking; too many questions could drive his father into one of his binges. He would dose himself to the brink of insensibility with memory sweeteners and stay up half the night weeping and babbling in the Taiwanese dialect of Fujian. His father had died when Wing was a junior at Yale. He had never met Daisy. Wing liked to think that the old man would have approved.

Wing tried hard to belong—at least to Daisy, if not to Piscataqua

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House. He had gutted the Counting House, a hundred-and-ninety-five-year old business annex built by the merchant Goodwins, and converted it into his offices. He was polite to the guests despite their annoying ignorance about the Cloud; most people thought it had been designed by Solon Petropolus. He helped out when she was short-handed, joined the Congregational Church despite a complete lack of religiosity, and served two terms on the city's Planning Board. He endured the dreaded black-tie fund raisers of the National Society of Colonial Dames for Daisy's sake and took her to the opera in Boston at least twice a year even though it gave him a headache. Now she was asking him to play host to an alien.

An intimate party of twenty-three had gathered in the Hawthorne parlor for a buffet in Ndavu's honor. Laporte had flown down from North Conway with his wife, Jolene. Among the locals were the Hathaways, who were still bragging about their vacation on Orbital Three, Magda Rudowski, Artistic Director of Theater-by-the-Sea, the new city manager, whose name Wing could never remember, and her husband, who never had anything to say, Reverend Smoot, the reformalist minister, and the Congemis, who owned SEE-Coast. There were also a handful of Ndavu's hangers-on, among them the glow sculptor, Jim McCauley.

Wing hated these kinds of parties. He had about as much chat in him as a Trappist monk. To help ease his awkwardness, Daisy sent him out into the room with their best cut-glass appetizer to help the guests get hungry. He wandered through other people's conversations, feeling lost.

"Oh, but we love it up north," Jolene Laporte was saying. "It's peaceful and the air is clean and the mountains . . . "

" . . . are tall," Laporte finished her sentence and winked as he reached for the appetizer. "But it's plugging cold—Jesus!" Magda Rudowski laughed nervously. Laporte looked twisted; he had the classic hollow stare, as if his eyes had just been fished out of a jar of formaldehyde.

"Don't make fun, Leon," Jolene said, pouting. "You love it too. Why, just the other day he was saying how nice it would be to stay on after the Cloud opened. I think he'd like to bask in his glory for a while." She sprayed a test dose from the appetizer onto her wrist and took a tentative sniff. "How legal is this?"

"Just some olfactory precursors," Wing said, "and maybe twenty ppm of Glow."

"Maybe I'm not the only one who deserves credit, Jolene. Maybe Phil here wants a slice of the glory too."

Daisy wheeled the alien into the parlor. "Phillip, I'd like you to meet Mentor Ndavu." Wing had never seen her so happy.

The alien was wearing a loose, black pinstriped suit. He might have been a corporate vice-president with his slicked-back gray hair and long, ruddy face except that he was over two meters tall. He had to slump to

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fit into his wheelchair and his knees stuck out like bumpers. The chair whined as it rolled; Ndavu leaned forward extending his hand. Wing found himself counting the fingers. Of course there were five. The Messengers were nothing if not thorough.

"I have been wanting to meet you, Phillip."

Wing shook hands. Ndavu's grip was firm and oddly sticky, like plastic wrap. The Messenger grinned. "I am very much interested in your work."

"As we all are interested in yours." Reverend Smoot brushed past Wing. "I, for one, would like to know . . . "

"Reverend," Ndavu spoke softly so that only those closest to him could hear, "must we always argue?"

" . . . would like to know, Mentor," continued Smoot in his pulpit voice, "how your people intend to respond to the advisory voted yesterday by the Council of Churches."

"Perhaps we should discuss business later, Reverend." Ndavu shot a porcelain smile at Laporte. "Leon, this must be your wife, Jolene."

Daisy got Wing's attention by standing utterly still. Between them passed an unspoken message which she punctuated by tilting her head. Wing's inclination was to let Smoot and Ndavu go at each other but he took firm hold of the Reverend's arm. "Would you like to see the greenhouse, Magda?" he said, turning the minister toward the actress. "The freesias are just coming into bloom; the place smells like the Garden of Eden. How about you, Reverend?" Glowering, Smoot allowed himself to be led away.

A few of the other guests had drifted out into what had once been the stables. Daisy's parents had replaced the old roof with sheets of clear optical plastic during the Farm Crusade, converting the entire wing into a greenhouse. In those days the inn might have closed without a reliable source of fresh produce. Magda Rudowski paused to admire a planter filled with tuberous begonias.

Reverend Smoot squinted through the krylac roof at the stars, as if seeking heavenly guidance. "I just have to wonder," he said, "who the joke is on."

Wing and Magda exchanged glances.

"How can you look at flowers when that alien is undermining the foundations of our Judeo-Christian heritage?"

Magda touched Smoot's sleeve. "It's a party, Reverend."

"If they don't believe in a god, how the hell can they apply for tax-exempt status? 'Look into the sun,' what kind of message is that? A year ago they wouldn't say a word to you unless you were from some government or conglomerate. Then they buy up some abandoned churches and suddenly they're preaching to anyone who'll listen. Look into the sun my ass." He took two stiff-legged steps toward the hydroponic benches and

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then spun toward Wing and Magda Rudowski. "You look into the sun too long and you go blind." He stalked off.

"I don't know what Daisy was thinking of when she invited him," Martha said.

"He married us," said Wing.

She sighed, as if that had been an even bigger mistake. "Shall I keep an eye on him for you?"

"Thanks." Wing thought then to offer her the appetizer. She inhaled a polite dose and Wing took a whiff himself, thinking he might as well make the best of what threatened to be bad business. The Glow loosened the knot in his stomach; he could feel his senses snapping to attention. They looked at each other and giggled. "Hell with him," he said, and then headed back to the parlor.

Jack Congemi was arguing in the hall with Laporte. "Here's just the man to settle this," he said.

"Congemi here thinks telelink is maybe going to put the trades out of business." Laporte spoke as though his brain were parked in lunar orbit and he were hearing his own words with a time delay. "Tell him you can't fuse plasteel gun emplacements in Tijuana sitting at a console in Greeley, Colorado. Makes no plugging difference how good your robotics are. You got to be there."

"The Koreans did it. They had sixty percent completion on Orbital Three before a human being ever set foot on it."

"Robots don't have a union," said Laporte. "The fusers do."

"Before telelink, none of us could have afforded to do business from a beautiful little nowhere like Portsmouth." Congemi liked to see himself as the local prophet of telelink; Wing had heard this sermon before. "We would have all been jammed into some urb hard by the jump port and container terminals and transitways and maglev trunks. Now no one has to go anywhere."

"But without tourists," said Wing, "inns close."

Congemi held his hands out like an archbishop blessing a crowd. "Of course, people will always travel for pleasure. And we at SEE-Coast will continue to encourage people to tour our beautiful Granite State. But we are also citizens of a new state, a state which is being born at this very moment. The world information state."

"Don't care where they come from." Laporte's voice slurred. "Don't care whether they're citizens of the plugging commonwealth of Messengers, just so long as they line up to see my Cloud." He poked a finger into Wing's shoulder as if daring him to object.

It was not the first time he had heard Laporte claim the Cloud as his. Wing considered throwing the man out and manners be damned. Instead he said, "We'll be eating soon," and went into the parlor.

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For a time he was adrift on the tides of the party, smiling too much and excusing himself as he nudged past people on his way to nowhere. He felt angry but the problem was that he was not exactly sure why. He told himself that it was all Daisy's fault. Her party. He aimed the appetizer at his face and squeezed off a piggish dose.

"Phillip. Please, do you have a moment?" Ndavu gave him a toothy grin. There was something strange about his teeth: they were too white, too perfect. He was talking to Mr. and Mrs. Hatcher Poole III, who were standing up against the wall like a matched set of silver lamps.

"Mentor Ndavu."

"Mentor is a title my students have given me. I am your guest and we are friends, are we not? You must call me Ndavu."

"Ndavu." Wing bowed slightly.

"May I?" The Messenger turned his wheelchair to Wing and held out his hand for the appetizer. "I had hoped for the chance to observe mind-altering behavior this evening." He turned the appetizer over in his long spider-like hands and then abruptly sprayed it into his face. The entire room fell silent and then the Messenger sneezed. No one had ever heard of such a thing, a Messenger sneezing. The Pooles looked horrified, as if the alien might explode next. Someone across the room laughed and conversation resumed.

"It seems to stimulate the chemical senses." Ndavu wrinkled his nose. "It acts to lower the threshold of certain olfactory and taste receptors. There are also trace elements of another substance—some kind of indole hallucinogen?"

"I'm an architect, not a drug artist."

Ndavu passed the appetizer on to Mrs. Poole. "Why do you ingest these substances?" The alien's skin was perfect too; he had no moles, no freckles, not even a wrinkle.

"Well," she said, still fluttering from his sneeze. "they *are* non-fattening."

Her husband laughed nervously. "I take it, sir, that you have never eaten vitabulk."

"Vitabulk? No." The Messenger leaned forward in his wheelchair. "I have seen reports."

"I once owned a bulkery in Nashua," continued Hatcher Poole. "The ideal product, in many ways: cheap to produce, nutritionally complete, an almost indefinite shelf life. Without it, hundred of millions would starve—"

"You see," said Wing, "it tastes like insulation,"

"Depends on the genetics of your starter batch," said Poole. "They're doing wonders these days with texturization."

"Bread flavor isn't that far off." Mrs. Poole had squeezed off a dose that

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they could probably smell in Maine. "And everything tastes better after a nice appetizer."

"Of course, we're serving natural food tonight," said Wing. "Daisy has had cook prepare a traditional meal in your honor, Ndavu." He wished she were here chatting and he was in the kitchen supervising final preparations. "However, some people prefer to use appetizers no matter what the menu."

"Prefer?" said Poole, who had passed the appetizer without using it. "A damnable addiction, if you ask me."

Two white-coated busboys carried a platter into the parlor, its contents hidden beneath a silver lid. They set it on the mahogany sideboard beneath a portrait of Nathaniel Hawthorne brooding. "Dinner is served!" The guests lined up quickly.

"Plates and utensils here, condiments on the tea table." Daisy's face was flushed with excitement. She was wearing that luminous blue dress he had bought for her in Boston, the one that had cost too much. "Cook will help you find what you want. Enjoy." Bechet, resplendent in his white cook's hat, placed a huge chafing dish beside the silver tray. With a flourish, Peter the busboy removed the lid from the silver tray. The guests buzzed happily and crowded around the sideboard, blocking Wing's view. He did not have to see the food, however; his hypersensitized olfactories were drenched in its aroma.

As he approached the sideboard, he could hear Bechet murmuring. "Wieners, sir. Hot dogs."

"Oh my god, Hal, potato salad—mayonnaise!"

"Did he say *dog*?"

"Nothing that amazing about relish. I put up three quarts myself last summer. But mustard!"

"No, no, I'll just have to live with my guilt."

"Corn dog or on a bun, Mr. Wing?" Bechet was beaming.

"On a bun please, Bechet." Wing held out his plate. "They seem to like it."

"I hope so, sir."

The guests were in various stages of gustatory ecstasy. The fare was not at all unusual for the wealthy; they ate at least one natural meal a day and meat or fish once a week. For others, forty-five grams of USDA guaranteed pure beef frankfurter was an extravagance: Christmas dinner, birthday treat. One of the strangers from the mission was the first to go for thirds. Ndavu had the good manners not to eat at all; perhaps he had orders not to alarm the natives with his diet.

The party fragmented after dinner; most guests seemed eager to put distance between themselves and the Messenger. It was a strain being

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in the same room with Ndavu; Wing could certainly feel it. Daisy led a group of gardeners to the greenhouse. Others gathered to watch the latest episode of *Jesus On First.* The religious spectacle of the hard-hitting Jesus had made it one of the most popular scripted sports events on telelink. The more boisterous guests went to the inn's cellar bar. Wing alone remained trapped in the Hawthorne parlor with the guest of honor.

"It has been a successful evening," said Ndavu, "so far."

"You came with an agenda?" Wing saw Peter the busboy gawking at the alien as he gathered up dirty plates.

Ndavu smiled. "Indeed I did. You are a very hard man to meet, Phillip. I am not sure why that is, but I hope now that things will be different. Will you visit me at the mission?"

Wing shrugged. "Maybe sometime." He was thinking to himself that he had the day after the heat death of the universe free.

"May I consider that a commitment?"

Wing stooped to pick up a pickle slice before someone—probably Peter—squashed it into the Kashgar rug. "I'm glad your evening has been a success," he said, depositing the pickle on Peter's tray as he went by.

"Before people accept the message, they must first accept the Messenger." He said it like a slogan. "You will forgive me if I observe that yours is a classically xenophobic species. The work has just begun; it will take years."

"Why do you do it? I mean you, personally."

"My motives are various—even I find it difficult to keep track of them all." The Messenger squirmed in the wheelchair and his knee brushed Wing's leg. "In that I suspect we may be alike, Phillip. The fact is, however, that my immediate concern is not spreading the message. It is getting your complete attention."

The alien was very close. "My attention?" Rumor had it that beneath their perfect exteriors lurked vile creatures, unspeakably grotesque. Evolutionary biologists maintained that it was impossible that the Messengers were humanoid.

"You should know that you are being considered for a most prestigious commission. I can say no more at this time but if you will visit me, I think we may discuss . . ."

Wing had stopped listening to Ndavu—saved by an argument out in the foyer. An angry man was shouting. A woman pleaded. Daisy. "Excuse me," he said, turning away from Ndavu.

"No, I won't go without you." The angry man was the glow sculptor, McCauley. He was about Wing's age, maybe a few years older. There was gray in his starchy brush of brown hair. He might have been taken for handsome in a blunt way except that his blue and silver stretchsuit was five years out of date and he was sweating.

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"For God's sake, Jimmy, would you stop it?" Daisy was holding out a coat and seemed to be trying to coax him into it. "Go home. Please. This isn't the time."

"You tell me when. I won't keep putting it off."

"Something the matter?" Wing went up on the balls of his feet. If it came to a fight he thought he could hold his own for the few seconds it would take reinforcements to arrive. But it was ridiculous, really; people in Portsmouth did not fight anymore. He could hear someone running toward the foyer from the kitchen. A knot of people clustered at the bottom of the stairs. He would be all right, he thought. "Daisy?" Still, it was a damned nuisance.

He was shocked by her reaction. She recoiled from him as if he were a monster out of her worst nightmare and then sank down onto the sidechair and started to cry. He ought to have gone to her then but McCauley was quicker.

"I'm sorry," he said. He took the coat from her nerveless hands and kissed her quickly on the cheek. Wing wanted to throw him to the floor but found he could not move. Nobody in the room moved but the stranger his wife had called Jimmy. Something in the way she had said his name had paralyzed Wing. All night long he had sensed a tension at the party but, like a fool, he had completely misinterpreted it. Everyone knew; if he moved they might all start laughing.

"Shouldn't have . . . " McCauley was murmuring something; his hand was on the door. "Sorry."

"You don't walk out now, do you?" Wing was proud of how steady his voice was. Daisy's shoulders were shaking. Her sculptor did not have an answer; he did not even stop to put on his coat. As the door closed behind him Wing had the peculiar urge to call Congemi out of the crowd and make him take responsibility for this citizen of the world information state. His brave new world was filled with people who had no idea of how to act in public.

"Daisy?"

She would not look at him. Although he felt as if he were standing stark naked in the middle of the foyer of the historic Piscataqua House, he realized no one was looking at him.

Except Ndavu.

"I said you've had enough." The dealer pushed Wing's twenty back across the bar. "There's such a thing as an overdose, you know. And I'd be liable."

Wing stared down at the twenty, as if Andy Jackson might offer him some helpful advice.

"The cab is waiting. You ought to go home."

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Wing glanced up without comprehension, trying to bring the man into focus.

"I said *go home.*"

Wing could not go home. The morning after the party he had moved out of Piscataqua House. Now he was living in his go-tube at a rack just off the Transitway. A burly hack appeared beside Wing and put an arm around him. The next thing he knew he was standing outside the flash bar.

"Is cold, yes?" The hack stamped his feet against the icy pavement and smiled; his teeth were decorated with Egyptian hieroglyphs. He was wearing thin joggers and the gold sweat suit of the Rockingham Cab Company.

"Exit 6. Stop Inn." The cold made it easier for Wing to think. He squeezed into the wedge-shaped pedicab; the big hack slithered onto the driver's crouch and slid his feet into the toe clips. A musty locker-room smell lingered in the passenger compartment. There was no space heater but after a few minutes of the hack's furious peddling the smell turned into a warm stink.

They were caught briefly in the usual jam on Islington Street. About twenty protesters had gathered in front of what had once been the Church of the Holy Spirit and was now the Messengers' mission to the states of New Hampshire and Maine. A few carried electric candles; others brandished hand-lettered signs that said things like "NO RELIGION WITHOUT GOD" and "LOOK INTO THE *BIBLE*." The rest circulated among the stalled bicycles and pedicars, distributing anti-Messenger propaganda. On a whim Wing opened his window just wide enough to accept a newsletter. "Go with Jesus," said the protester. As the pedicab rolled away, he unfolded the newsletter. All he could read by street light were headlines: "SCIENCE SAYS NO IMMORTALITY" and "ALABAMA BANS ALIENS" and "HOW THEY REALLY LOOK."

"J-freaks always back up traffic here," said the hack. "Wouldn't read this crap if you paid me." He jerked his thumb at the mission. "Ever scan the message?"

"Not yet."

"No worse than any other church; better than some. The beetles'll feed you, give you a warm bed. Course, they don't explain nothing, except to tell you there's no such a thing as pleasure. Or pain." He laughed. "Maybe that's the beetle way, but it ain't the way life tastes to me."

As they approached Exit 6, they passed through a neighborhood of shabby go-tube parks and entered the strip. The strip was an architectural tumor that had metastasized to Transitway exits from Portsmouth, Virginia to Portsmouth, New Hampshire—a garish clump of chain vitabulk joints, clothes discounters, flash bars, surrogatoriums, motels,

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data shops, shoe stores, tube racks, bike dealers, too many warehouses, and a few moribund tourist traps selling plastic lobsters and screaming T-shirts. What was not malled was connected by optical plastic tunnels, once transparent but now smudged with sea salt and pollution. In the midst of it all squatted a US Transit Service terminal of bush-hammered concrete that was supposed to look like rough-cut granite. Docked at the terminal were semis and container trains and red-white-and-blue USTS busses in all sizes, from the enormous double-decked trunk line rigs to local twenty-passenger carryvans.

The Stop Inn was on the far edge of the strip, a six-story plastic box that looked like yet another warehouse except for the five-story stop sign painted on its east facade. There were hook-ups for about forty go-tubes on the top three floors and another forty fixed tubes on the bottom three. The stairwell smelled of smoke and disinfectant.

Wing and Daisy had customized their go-tube on spare weekends right after they had been married but they had only used it twice: vacations at the disneydome in New Jersey and the Grand Canyon. Somehow they could never find time to get away. The tube had an oak rolltop desk, a queen-sized Murphy bed with a gel mattress and Wing's one extravagance: an Alvar Aalto loveseat. The ceiling was a single sheet of mirror plastic that Wing had nearly broken his back installing. At the far end was a microwave, sink, toilet and mirror set in a wall surround of Korean tile that Daisy had spent two months picking out. A monitor and keyboard were mounted on a flex-arm beside the bed. The screen was flashing; he had messages.

"Phillip." Ndavu sat in an office at an enormous desk; he looked like a banker who had just realized he had made a bad loan. "I am calling to see if there's anything I can do to help . . . "

Wing paused the message and poured himself two fingers of scotch—no water, no ice.

" . . . I want you to know how sorry I am about the way things have turned out. I have just seen Daisy and I must tell you that she is extremely upset. If there is anything I can do to help resolve the problem, please, *please* let . . . "

"Yeah," Wing muttered, "get the hell out of my life."

" . . . you did promise to stop by the mission. There is still the matter of the commission I mentioned . . . " Wing deleted the message. He finished his drink before bringing up the next message in the queue.

"We have to talk, Phil." Daisy was sitting in shadow; her face was a low-res blur. She sounded like she had a cold. "It's not fair, what you're doing. You can't just throw everything away without giving me a chance to explain. I know I waited too long but I didn't want to hurt you . . . Maybe you won't believe this but I still love you. I don't know what to say . . . it

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can't be like it was before but maybe . . . " There was a long silence. "Call me," she said.

Wing drew a breath that burned his throat worse than the whiskey and then he smashed the keyboard with his fist, pounding at the delete key again and again until her face went away. His hand was numb and there was blood smeared on the keys.

The Messengers' mission on Islington Street sprawled over an entire block, an unholy jumble of architectural afterthoughts appended to the simple neogothic chapel that had once been the Church of the Holy Spirit. There was a Victorian rectory, a squat brick-facade parochial school built in the 1950s, and an eclectic auditorium that dated from the oughts. The fortunes of the congregation had since declined and the complex had been abandoned, successfully confounding local redevelopers until the Messengers bought it. The initiates of northern New England's first mission had added an underground bike lockup, washed the stained glass, repaired the rotted clapboards and planted an arborvitae screen around the auditorium and still Wing thought it was the ugliest building in Portsmouth.

In the years immediately after first contact there had been no contact at all with the masses; complex and secret negotiations continued between the Messengers and various political and industrial interests. Once the deals were struck, however, the aliens had moved swiftly to open missions for the propagation of the message, apparently a strange brew of technophilic materialism and zen-like self-effacement, sweetened by the promise of cybernetic immortality. The true import of the mesage was a closely held secret; the Messengers would neither confirm nor deny the reports of those few initiates who left the missions.

Wing hesitated at the wide granite steps leading to the chapel; they were slick from a spring ice storm. Freshly sprinkled salt was melting holes in the ice and there was a shovel propped against one of the massive oak doors. It was five-thirty in the morning—too early for protesters. No one inside would be expecting visitors, which was fine with Wing: he wanted to surprise the Messenger. But the longer he stood, the less certain he was of whether he was going in. He looked up at the eleven stone apostles arranged across the tympanum. Tiny stylized flames danced over their heads, representing the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. He could not read the apostles' expressions; acid rain had smudged their faces. Wing felt a little smudged himself. He reached into his back pocket for the flask. He took a swig and found new courage as a whiskey flame danced down his throat. He staggered into the church—twisted in the good old-fashioned way and too tired to resist Ndavu anymore.

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As his eyes adjusted to the gloom Wing saw that there had been some changes made in the iconography. Behind the altar hung a huge red flag with the Buddhist Wheel of Law at its center and the words "LOOK INTO THE SUN" embroidered in gold thread beneath it. A dancing Shiva filled a niche next to a statue of Christ Resurrected. Where the Stations of the Cross had once been were now busts: Pythagoras, Plato, Lao-tze. Others whose names he did not recognize were identified as Kabalists, Gnostics, Sufis, and Theosophists—whatever they were. Wing had not known what to expect but this was not quite it. Still, he thought he understood what the Messengers were trying to do. The Romans had been quick to induct the gods of subjugated peoples into their pantheon. And what was humanity if not subjugated? That was why he had come, he thought bitterly. To acknowledge that he was beaten.

A light came on in the vestry next to the altar. Footsteps echoed across the empty church and then Jim McCauley stepped into the candlelight and came to the edge of the altar rail. "Is someone there?"

Wing swayed down the aisle, catching at pews to steady himself. He felt as empty as the church. As he approached the altar he saw that McCauley was wearing a loosely tied yellow bathrobe; his face was crinkled, as if he had just then come from a warm bed. With Daisy? Wing told himself that it did not matter anymore, that he had to concentrate on the plan he had discovered an hour ago at the bottom of a bottle of Argentinean Scotch: catch them off guard and then surrender. He saluted McCauley.

The man gathered his yellow bathrobe more tightly. "Who is it?"

Wing stepped up to the altar rail and grasped it to keep from falling. "Phillip Wing, A.I.A. Here to see the head beetle." McCauley looked blank. "Ndavu to you."

"The mentor expects you, Phillip?"

Wing cackled. "I should hope not."

"I see." McCauley gestured at the gate in the center of the altar rail. "Come this way—do you need help, Phillip?"

In response Wing vaulted the rail. His trailing foot caught and he sprawled at McCauley's feet. The sculptor was wearing yellow plastic slippers to match the robe.

"Hell no," Wing said and picked himself up.

McCauley eyed him doubtfully and then ushered him through the vestry to a long flight of stairs. As they descended, Peter Bornsten, the busboy from Piscataqua House, scurried around the corner and sprinted up toward them, taking steps two at a time.

"Peter," said McCauley. "I thought you were shoveling the steps."

Peter froze. Wing had never seen him like this: he was wearing janitors' greens and had the lame expression of a guilty eight-year-old. "I was,

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Jim, but the ice was too hard and so I salted it and went down to the kitchen for some coffee. I was cold," he said lamely. He glared briefly at Wing as if it were his fault and then hung his head. The Peter Bornsten Wing knew was a careless young stud whose major interests were stimulants and nurses.

"Go and finish the steps," McCauley touched Peter's forehead with his middle finger. "The essence does not experience cold, Peter."

"Yes, Jim." He bowed and scraped by them.

McCauley's slippers flapped as he walked slowly down the hallway that ran the length of the mission's basement. Doorways without doors opened into rooms filled with cots. It looked as if there were someone sleeping on every one. Wing smelled the yeasty aroma of curing vitabulk long before they passed a kitchen where three cooks were sitting at a table around four cups of ersatz coffee. At the end of the hall double doors opened onto an auditorium jammed with folding tables and chairs. A door to the right led up a short flight of stairs to a large telelink conferencing room and several small private offices.

McCauley went to one of the terminals at the conference table and tapped at the keyboard. Wing had a bad angle on the screen; all he could see was the glow. "Phillip Wing," said McCauley and the screen immediately went dark.

Wing sat down across the table from him and pulled out his flask. "Want some?" There was no reply. "You the welcoming committee?"

McCauley remained standing. "I spread the message, Phillip."

Someone else might have admired the calm with which McCauley was handling himself; Wing wanted to see the bastard sweat. "I thought you were supposed to be an artist. You had shows in New York, Tokyo—you had a career going."

"I did." He shrugged. "But my reasons for working were all wrong. Too much ego, not enough essence. The Messengers showed me how trivial art is."

Wing could not let him get away with that. "Maybe it's just you that's trivial. Maybe you didn't have the stuff to make art that meant anything. Ever think of that?"

McCauley smiled. "Yes." Daisy came into the room.

It had been twenty-two days since he had last seen his wife; Wing was disgusted with himself for knowing the number exactly. After the party he had worked hard at avoiding her. He had tried to stay out of the arid precincts of her Portsmouth while lowering himself into the swamp around its edges. He had reprogrammed the door to the Counting House to admit no one but him and had changed his work schedule, sneaking in just often enough to keep up appearances. He had never replied to the messages she left for him.

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"What is she doing here?" Wing was tempted to walk out.

"I think it best that you wait alone with him, Daisy," said McCauley.

"Best for who?" said Wing.

"For her, of course. Look into the sun, Daisy."

"Yes, Jim."

"Phillip." He bowed and left them together.

"Look into the sun. Look into the sun." He opened the flask. "What the hell does that mean anyway?"

"It's like a koan—a proverb. It takes a long time to explain." Daisy looked as though she had put herself together in a hurry: wisps of hair fell haphazardly across her forehead and the collar of her mud-colored jumpsuit was turned up. She settled across the table from him and drummed her fingers on a keyboard, straightened her hair, glanced at him and then quickly away. He realized that she did not want to be there either and he took another drink.

"Keep your secrets then—who cares? I came to see Ndavu."

"He's not here right now."

"All right." He pushed the chair back. "Goodbye, then."

"No, please." She seemed alarmed. "He's coming. Soon. He'll want to see you; he's been waiting a long time."

"It's good for him." Wing thought she must have orders to keep him there; that gave him a kind of power over her. If he wanted to he could probably steer this encounter straight into one of the revenge fantasies that had so often been a bitter substitute for sleep. No matter what he said, she would have to listen.

"Are you often like this?" she said.

"What the hell do you care?" He drank and held out the flask. "Want some?"

"You haven't returned my calls."

"That's right." He shook the flask at her.

She did not move. "I know what you've been doing."

"What is it you're waiting to hear, Daisy?" Saying her name did it. The anger washed over him like the first wave of an amphetamine storm. "That I've spent the last three weeks twisted out of my mind? That I can't stand to live without you? Well, plug yourself. Even if it were true I wouldn't give you the satisfaction."

She sat like a statue, her face as smooth and as invulnerable as stone, her eyes slightly glazed, as if she were meditating at the same time she pretended to listen to him. His anger surged, and he veered out of control.

"You're not worth it, you know that? It gets me right in the gut sometimes, that I ever felt anything for you. You pissed on everything I thought was important in my life and I was dumb enough to be surprised when you did it. Look at you. I'm suffering and you sit there like you're

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carved out of bloody ice. And calling it good breeding, no doubt. Fine. Great. But just remember that when you die, you bitch, you'll be nothing but another stinking puddle on the floor."

Then Wing saw the tear. At first he was not even sure that it was hers: her expression had not changed. Maybe a water pipe had leaked through the ceiling and dripped on her. The tear rolled down her cheek and dried near the corner of her mouth. A single tear. She held her head rigidly erect, looking at him. He realized then that she had seen his pain and heard his anger and that her indifference was a brittle mask which he could shatter, if he were cruel enough. Suddenly he was ashamed.

He leaned forward, put his elbows on the table, his head in his hands. He felt like crying too. "It's been hard," he said. He shivered, took a deep breath. "I'm sorry." He wanted to reach across the table and wipe away the track of her tear with his finger but she was too far away.

They sat without speaking. He imagined she was thinking serene Messenger thoughts; he contemplated the ruins of their marriage. Ever since the party Wing had hoped, secretly, desperately, that Daisy would in time offer some explanation that he could accept—even if it were not true. He had expected to be reconciled. Now for the first time he realized that she might not want a reconciliation. The silence stretched. The telelink rang; Daisy tapped at the keyboard.

"He's in his office," she said.

Ndavu's grin reminded Wing of the grin that Leonardo had given his John the Baptist: mysterious, ironic, fey. "We do not, as you say, keep the message to ourselves." Ndavu's wheelchair was docked at an enormous desk; the scale of the Messenger's office made Wing feel like a midget. "On the contrary we have opened missions around the world in the last year where we assist all who seek enlightenment. Surely you see that it would be irresponsible for us to disseminate transcendently important information without providing the guidance necessary to its understanding." Ndavu kept nodding as if trying to entice Wing to nod back and accept his evasions.

Wing had the feeling that Ndavu would prefer that he settle back on the couch and think about how lucky he was to be the first human ever invited to tour a Messenger starship. He wondered if the initiates would be jealous when they found out that an unbeliever was going to take that prize. "Then keep your goddamned secret—why can't you just give us plans for the reincarnation computer and loan us the keys to a starship?"

"Technology is the crux of the message, Phillip."

Daisy sat beside Wing in luminous silence, listening to the conversation as if it were the fulfillment of a long-cherished dream. "Is she going to be reincarnated?" Her serenity was beginning to irk him, or

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maybe it was just that he was beginning to sober up to a blinding headache. "Is that the reward for joining?"

"The message is its own reward," she murmured.

"Don't you want to be reincarnated?"

"The essence does not want. It acknowledges karma."

"The essence?" Wing could feel a vein throbbing just above his right eyebrow.

"That which can be reincarnated," she said.

"There are no easy answers, Phillip," said Ndavu.

"Great." He shook his head in disgust. "Does anyone have an aspirin?"

Daisy went to check. "Everything is interconnected," the Messenger continued. "For instance I could tell you that it is the duty of intelligence to resist entropy. How could you hope to understand me? You would have to ask: What is intelligence? What is entropy? How may it be resisted? Why is it a duty? These are questions which it took the commonwealth of Messengers centuries to answer."

Daisy returned with McCauley. "What we will ask of you," continued Ndavu, "does not require that you accept our beliefs. Should you wish to seek enlightenment, then I will be pleased to guide you, Phillip. However you should know that it is not at all clear whether it is possible to grasp the message in the human lifespan. We have only just begun to study your species and have yet to measure its potential."

McCauley stood behind the couch, waiting inconspicuously for Ndavu to finish dodging the question. He rested a hand on Wing's shoulder, as if he were an old pal trying to break into a friendly conversation. "Excuse me, Phillip," said McCauley. Just then Wing remembered something he had forgotten to do. Something that had nagged at him for weeks. He was sober enough now to stay angry and the son of a bitch kept calling him by his first name.

"I'm very sorry, Phillip," said McCauley with a polite smile, "but we don't have much use for drugs here. However, if you're really in need we could send someone out . . . "

Wing shot off the couch, turned and hit his wife's lover right in the smile. Astonished, McCauley took the punch. The sculptor staggered backwards, fists clenched, and Daisy gave a strangled little scream. Ndavu was grotesquely expressionless. It was as if his face were a mask that had slipped, revealing . . . nothing. Wing had never seen the Messenger look quite so alien.

"That's okay." He sat down, rubbing his knuckles. "I feel much better now."

McCauley touched his bloody lip and then turned and walked quickly from the office. Daisy was staring at Ndavu's abandoned face. Wing

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settled back on the couch and—for the first time in weeks—started to laugh.

The Messengers had done a thorough job; Wing's cabin on the starship was a copy of the interior of his go-tube—with a few differences. The gravity was .6 earth normal. The floor was not tongue-and-grooved oak but some kind of transparent crystal; beneath him reeled the elephant-skin wrinkles of the Zagros mountains. And Daisy slept next door.

Wing stared like a blind man at the swirling turquoise shallows that rimmed the Persian Gulf; Ndavu's arduous briefing had turned his sense of wonder to stone. He now knew everything about a planet called Aseneshesh that a human being could absorb in forty-eight hours without going mad. When he closed his eyes he could see the aliens Ndavu called the Chani. Tall and spindly, they looked more like pipe cleaner men than creatures of flesh and bone. Starving apes with squashed faces and pink teeth. He found them profoundly disturbing—as much for their similarities to *homo sapiens* as for their differences. Wing could imagine that they had once been human but had been cruelly transformed over eons of evolutionary torture.

He knew a little of their history. When glaciers threatened to crush their civilization, most had chosen exile and had left the planet in an evacuation organized by the Messengers. Something had happened to those that remained behind, something that the Messengers still did not understand. Even as they slid into barbarism, these Chani began to evolve at an accelerated rate. Something was pushing them toward a biological immortality totally unlike the hardware-based reincarnations of the Messengers. Their cities buried and their machines beyond repair, they had huddled around smoky fires and discovered within themselves the means to intervene in the aging process—by sheer force of mind they could tilt the delicate balance between anabolism and catabolism. They called it shriving. With their sins forgotten and their cells renewed, the Chani could lead many lives in one body, retaining only a few memories from one life to the next. What baffled the materialist Messengers was that shriving was the central rite of a religion based on sun worship. Believe in Chan, the survivors had urged the astonished commonwealth upon their rediscovery centuries after the evacuation: look into the sun and live again.

Although they embraced some of the concepts of the Chani religion, the Messengers could hardly accept shriving as a divine gift from a class G1 main sequence star. Despite intensive and continuing research, they were unable to master the biology of rejuvenation. The only benefits they were able to derive from the Chani's evolutionary breakthrough were delta globulins derived from blood plasma, which acted to slow or even

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halt the aging process in many of the commonwealth's species. The Messengers could not synthesize the intricate Chani globulins, which left the self-proclaimed goddess and ruler of the Chani in control of the sole source of the most valuable commodity in the commonwealth. That deity was the thearch Teaqua, the oldest living being in the commonwealth. Teaqua, who had sent Ndavu to earth to fetch her an architect. Teaqua, who was dying.

"She wants a tomb, Phillip, and she claims Chan told her a *human* must build it." Ndavu had given up his wheelchair in the starship's low gravity. As he spoke he had walked gingerly about Wing's cabin, like a barefoot man watching out for broken glass. "You will design it and oversee its construction."

"But if she's immortal . . . "

"No, even the Chani die. Eventually they choose death over shriving. We believe there must be physical limits related to the storage capacity of their brains. They say that the weight of all their lives becomes too heavy to carry. Think of it, Phillip: a tomb for a goddess. Has any architect had an opportunity to compare? This commission is more important than anything that Seven Wonders—or anyone on earth—could offer you. It has historic implications. You could be the one to lead your entire world into the commonwealth."

"So why me? There must be thousands who would jump at this."

"On the contrary, there are but a handful." The Messenger seemed troubled by Wing's question. "I will be blunt with you, Phillip; one cannot avoid the relativistic effects of the mass exchanger. You will be taking a one-way trip into the future. What you will experience as a trip of a few weeks duration will take centuries downtime, here on this planet. There is no way we can predict what changes will occur. You must understand that the earth to which you return may seem as alien as Aseneshesh." He paused just long enough to scare Wing. "You will, however, return a hero. While you are gone, your name will be remembered and revered; we will see to it that you become a legend. Your work will influence generations of artists; school children will study your life. You could also be rich, if you wanted."

"And you're telling me no one else could do this? No one?"

"There is a certain personality profile. Our candidate must be able to survive two stressful cultural transitions with his faculties intact. Your personal history indicates that you have the necessary resilience. Talent is yet another qualification."

Wing snickered. "But not as important as being a loner with nothing to lose."

"I do not accept that characterization." Ndavu settled uneasily onto the loveseat; he did not quite fit. "The fact is, Phillip, that we have

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already been refused twice. Should you too turn us down, we will proceed to the next on the list. You should know, however, that our time is running out and that you are the last of our prime candidates. The others have neither your ability nor your courage."

Courage. The word made Wing uncomfortable; he did not think of himself as a brave man. "What I still don't understand," he said, "is why you need a human in the first place. Build it yourself, if it's so damned important."

"We would prefer that. However Teaqua insists that only a human can do what she says Chan wants."

"That's absurd."

"Of *course* it is absurd." Ndavu made no effort to conceal his scorn. "We are talking about fifty million intelligent beings who believe that the local star cares for them. We are talking about a creature of flesh and blood who believes she has become a god. You cannot apply the rules of logic to religious superstition."

"But how did they find out about humans in the first place?"

"That I can explain," Ndavu said, "only if you will promise to keep my response a secret."

Wing hesitated; he was not sure if he wanted to know Messenger secrets. "How do you know I'll keep my promise?"

"We will have to learn to trust one another, Phillip." Ndavu unvelcroed the front of his jumpsuit; his chest was pale and smooth. "It is a problem of cultural differences." Wing backed away as the Messenger pushed a finger into the base of his neck. "Teaqua asked if we knew of any beings like the Chani, and we told her. *Homo sapiens* and the Chani share a unique genetic heritage," said Ndavu as his sternum unknit. "There are no other beings like you in the commonwealth." Wing pressed himself flat against the far wall of the cabin; the handle on the door of the microwave dug into him. "Genes are the ultimate source of culture."

Wing heard a low squishing sound, like a wet sponge being squeezed, as something uncoiled within the exposed body cavity. "I-I understand," he gasped. "Enough!"

The Messenger nodded and resealed himself. He stood, shuffled across the cabin and held out his hand. Wing shook it gingerly.

"You have qualities, Phillip," said Ndavu. "You are ambitious and impatient with the waste of your talents. The first time I saw you, I knew you were the one we needed."

Wing felt like throwing up.

"Will you at least think it over?"

Now he was alone with an intoxicating view of the earth, trying to sort fact from feeling, wrestling with his doubts. It was true: he had been increasingly uneasy in his work. Even the Glass Cloud was not all he

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had hoped it would be. *A tomb for a goddess.* It was too much, too fantastic. Thinking about it made Wing himself feel unreal. Here he sat with the earth at his feet, gazing down at the wellspring of civilization like some ancient, brooding god. *A legend.* He thought that if he were home he could see his way more clearly. Except that he had no home anymore, or at least he could never go home to Piscataqua House. The thought was depressing; was there really nothing to hold him? He wondered whether Ndavu had brought him to the starship to feed his sense of unreality, to cut him off from the reassurance of the mundane. He would have never been able to take this talk of gods and legends seriously had he been sitting at his desk at the Counting House with the rubber plant gathering dust near the window and his diploma from Yale hanging next to *John the Baptist.* Wing could see the Baptist smiling like a messenger as he pointed up at heaven—to the stars? *A one way trip.* So Ndavu thought he was brave enough to go. But was he brave enough to stay? To turn down such a project and to live with that decision for the rest of his life? Wing was afraid that he was going to accept because there was nothing else for him to do. He would be an exile, *he* would be the alien. Wing had never even been in space before. Maybe that was why Ndavu had brought him here to make the offer. So that the emptiness of space could speak to the coldness growing within him.

Wing stood and walked quickly out of the cabin as if to escape his own dark thoughts. He took a moment to orient himself and then swung across the gravity well to the next landing. There was an elaborate access panel with printreader and voice analyzer and a numeric keypad and vidscanner; he knocked.

Daisy opened the door. Her room exhaled softly and she brushed the hair from her face. She was wearing the same mud-colored jumpsuit; he could not help but think of all the beautiful clothes hanging in her closet at Piscataqua House.

"Come in." She stood aside as he entered. He was surprised again at how exactly her cabin duplicated his. She observed him solemnly. He wondered if she ever smiled when she was alone.

"I don't want to talk about it," he said, answering the unspoken question. "I don't even want to think about it. I wish he would just go away."

"He won't."

He read the sympathy in her expression and wondered exactly why Ndavu had brought her along. "What I could use is a drink."

"What did you want to talk about?" She sat next to him.

"Nothing." He felt like blurting out Ndavu's secret; he thought it might make a difference to her. But he had promised. "I don't know." Wing scratched his ear. "I never told you that it was a nice party. The hot dogs were a big hit."

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She smiled. "Snob appeal had something to do with it, don't you think? I'm sure that most of them like vitabulk just fine. But they have to rave about natural or else people will think they have no taste. At the mission we've been eating raw batch and no one complains. After a while natural seems a little bit decadent—or at least a waste of time."

"The essence can't taste mustard, eh?"

Before Ndavu, she might have detected the irony in his voice and bristled at it; now she nodded. "Exactly."

"But what *is* the essence? How can anything be *you* that can't taste mustard, that doesn't even have a body?"

"The essence is that part of mind which can be reproduced in artificial media," she said with catechetical swiftness.

"And that's what you want when you die, to have your personality deleted, your memories summarized and edited and re-edited until all you are is a collection of headlines about yourself stored in a computer?" He shook his head. "Sounds like a lousy substitute for heaven."

"But *heaven* is a myth."

"Okay," he said, trying to match her calm but not quite succeeding, "but I can't help but notice that the Messengers are in no hurry to have their essences extracted. They use the Chani globulins to keep themselves alive as long as they can. Why? And since they can't explain shriving, how do they know heaven is a myth?"

"Nothing is perfect, Phil." He was surprised to hear her admit it. "That's the most difficult part of the message. We can't claim perfection; we can only aspire to it."

"You've been spending a lot of time at the mission?"

"Ndavu is very demanding."

"And what about Piscataqua House? Who's minding the inn?"

She looked blank for a moment, as if trying to remember something that was not very important. "The inn pretty much takes care of itself, I guess." She frowned. "Business is terrible, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

"We've been in the red for over a year. Nobody goes any place these days." She tugged at a wrinkle in the leg of her jumpsuit. "I've been thinking of selling or maybe even just closing the old place up."

Wing was shocked. "You never told me you were having problems."

She stared through the floor for a moment. The starship's rotation had presented them with a view of the hazy blue rim of earth's atmosphere set against star-flecked blackness. "No," she said finally. "Maybe I didn't. At first I thought the Cloud might turn things around. Bring more tourists to New Hampshire, to Portsmouth—to the inn to see you. Ndavu offered a loan to hold me over. But now it doesn't matter much anymore."

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"Ndavu!" Wing stood and began to pace away his anger. "Always Ndavu. He manipulated us to get his way. You must see that."

"Of course I see. You're the one who doesn't see. It's not his way he's trying to get. It's *the* way." She leaned forward as if to stop him and make him listen. He backed away. "He has disrupted dozens of lives just to bring you here. If you had given him any kind of chance, none of it would have happened. But you were prejudiced against him or just stubborn—I don't know what you were." Her eyes gleamed. "Haven't you figured it out yet? I think he wanted me to fall in love with Jim McCauley."

Wing gazed at her in silent horror.

"And he was right to do it; Jim has been good for me. He isn't obsessed with himself and his projects and his career. He finds the time to listen—to be there when I need him."

"You let that alien use you to get to me?"

"I didn't know at the time that he was doing it. I didn't know enough about the message to appreciate why he had to do it. But now I'm glad. I would have just been another reason for you to turn him down. It's important that you go to Aseneshesh. It's the most important thing you'll ever do."

"It's so important that two other people turned him down, right? I should too. Just because I fit some damned personality profile . . . "

"He said it that way only because you haven't yet accepted the message. He's not just some telelink psych, Phil, he can see into your essence. He knows what you need to grow and reach fulfillment. He knew when he asked you that you would accept."

Wing felt dizzy. "If I leave with him and go uptime or whatever he calls it—zapping off at the speed of light—I'll never see you again. You'll be downtime here, and you'll be dead for centuries before I get back. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"It means I'll always miss you." Her voice was flat, as if she were talking about a stolen towel.

He crossed the room to her, dropped to his knees, took her hands. "You meant so much to me, Daisy. Still do, after everything." He spoke without hope, yet he was compelled to say it. "All I want is to go back to the way it was. Do you remember? I know you remember."

"I remember we were two lonely people, Phil. We couldn't give each other what we needed." She made him let go and then ran her hand through his hair. "I remember I was unhappy." Sometimes when they were alone, reading or watching telelink, she would scratch his head. Now she fell absently into the old habit. Even though he knew he had lost her, he took comfort from it.

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"I was always afraid to be happy." Wing rested his head in her lap. "I felt as if I didn't deserve to be happy."

The stars shone up at them with an ancient, pitiless light. Ndavu had done a thorough job, Wing thought. He's given me good reasons to go, reasons enough not to stay. The Messengers were nothing if not thorough.

Wing was dreaming of his father. In the dream his father was asleep on the Murphy bed in the go-tube. Wing had just returned from a parade held to honor him as the first human to go to the stars and he was angry that his father had not been there. Wing shook him, told him to wake up. His father stared up at him with rheumy, hopeless eyes and Wing noticed how frail he was. Look at me, Wing said to the old man, I've done something that was much harder than what you did. I didn't just leave my country, I left the planet, my time, everything. And I adjusted. I was strong and I survived. His father smiled like a Messenger. You love to dramatize yourself, said the old man. You think you are the hero of your story. His father began to shrink. But surviving takes a long time, he said and then he was nothing but a wet spot on the sheet and Wing was alone.

The telelink rang, jolting Wing awake. He cursed himself for an idiot; he had forgotten to set the screening program. The computer brought up the lights of his go-tube as he fumbled at the keyboard beside his bed.

"Phillip Wing speaking. Hello?"

"Mr. Wing? Phillip Wing? This is Hubert Fields; I'm with the Boston desk of Infoline. Can you tell me what's going on there?"

"Yes." Wing tapped a key and opened a window on the telelink's monitor. He could see the skyline of Portsmouth against a horizon the color of blue cat's-eye; the status line said 5:16 AM. "I'm sitting here stark naked, having just been rudely awakened by your call, and I'm wondering why I'm talking to you." The pull of earth's gravity had left him stiff and irritable.

Fields sounded unperturbed; Wing could not remember if he had ever been interviewed by this one before. "We've had confirmation from two sources that the messenger Ndavu has offered you a commission which would require that you travel to another planet. Do you have any comment?"

"All I can say is that we have discussed a project."

"On another planet?"

Wing yawned.

"We've also had reports that you recently toured the Messenger starship, which would make you the first human to do so. Can you describe the ship for us?"

Silence.

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"Mr. Wing? Can you at least tell me when you'll be leaving earth?"

"No."

"You can't tell us?"

"I haven't decided what I'm doing yet. I'm hanging up now. Make sure there're two l's in Phillip."

"Will we see you at the ceremonies today?"

Wing broke the connection. Before he could roll back into bed the computer began playing his Thursday morning wakeup: the Minuet from Suite No. 1 of Handel's Water Music. It was 5:30; today was the dedication of the Glass Cloud.

He squashed the gel mat with its nest of blankets and sheets back into the wall of the go-tube. Most of his clothes were scattered in piles on the oak floor but Daisy had bought him a gray silk Mazzini suit for the occasion which was still hanging in its garment bag on the towel rack. Twice he had returned it; she had sent it back to him both times. He tried it on: a little loose in the waist. Daisy had not realized that he had lost weight since he had moved out.

Wing walked briskly across the strip to the USTS terminal where he was just in time to catch the northbound red-white-and-blue. It seemed as though everybody in the world had offered to give Wing a ride to North Conway that day, which was why he had perversely chosen to take a bus. He boarded the 6:04 carryvan which was making its everyday run up Route 16 with stops in Dover, Rochester, Milton, Wakefield, Ossipee, and North Conway. The spectators who would flock to the dedication were no doubt still in bed. They would arrive after lunch in hovers from New York or in specially-chartered 328 double-deckers driving nonstop from Boston and Portland and Manchester. Some would come in private cars; the Vice-President and the Secretary of the Interior were flying in from Washington on Air Force One. New Hampshire state police expected a crowd upwards of half a million, scattered along the ninety-seven kilometers of the Glass Cloud's circuit.

A crowd of angry locals had gathered at the bus stop in Ossipee. They hustled a clown on board and then banged the side of the carryvan with open hands to make the driver pull out. The clown was wearing a polka-dotted bag that came down to her ankles and left her arms bare; the dots cycled slowly through the spectrum. She had a paper-white skin tint and her hair was dyed to match the orange circles around her eyes. A chain of tiny phosphorescent bananas joined both ears and dangled beneath her chin. A woman up front tittered nervously; the man across the aisle from Wing looked disgusted. Even New Hampshire Yankees could not politely ignore such an apparition. But of course she wanted to be noticed; like all clowns she lived to provoke the astonished or disapproving stare.

"Seat taken?" she said. The carryvan accelerated abruptly, as if the

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driver had deliberately tried to make her fall. The clown staggered and sprawled next to Wing. "Is now." She laughed, and shoved her camouflage-colored duffle bag under the seat in front of her. "Where ya goin?"

Wing leaned his head against the window. "North Conway."

"Yeah? Me too. Name's Judy Thursday." She held out her hand to Wing.

"Phillip." He shook it weakly and the man across the aisle snorted. The clown's skin felt hot to the touch, as if she had the metabolism of a bird.

They rode in silence for a while; the clown squirmed in her seat and hummed to herself and clapped her hands and giggled. Eventually she opened the duffle bag and pulled out a small grease-stained cardboard box. "Popcorn? All natural."

Wing gazed at her doubtfully. The white skin tint made her eyes look pink. He had been on the road for two hours and had skipped breakfast.

"Very nutritious." She stuffed a handful into her mouth. "Popped it myself."

She was the kind of stranger mothers warned little children about. But Wing was hungry and the smell was irresistible. "They seemed awfully glad to see you go back there," he said, hesitating.

"No sense of humor, Phil." She put a kernel on the tip of her tongue and curled it into her mouth. "Going to the big party? Dedications are my favorite; always some great goofs. Bunch of us crashed the dedication of this insurance company tower—forget which—down in Hartford, Connecticut. Smack downtown, tallest building, the old edifice complex, you know? You shoulda seen, the suits went crazy. They had this buffet like—real cheese and raw veggies and some kinda meat. We spraypainted the entire spread with blue food coloring. And then I got into the HVAC system and planted a perfume bomb. Joint must still smell like lilacs." She leaned her head back against the seat and laughed. "Yeah, architecture is my life." She shook the popcorn box at Wing and he succumbed to temptation. The stuff was delicious.

"Hey, nice suit." The clown caught Wing's sleeve as he reached for another handful and rubbed it between thumb and forefinger. "Real silk, wow. How come you're riding the bus, Phil?"

Wing pulled free, gently. "Looking for something." He found himself slipping into her clipped dialect. "Not sure exactly what. Maybe a place to live."

"Yeah." She nodded vigorously. "Yeah. Beautiful country for goofs. The whole show is gonna be a goof, I figure. What do you think?"

Wing shrugged.

"I mean like what is this Glass Cloud anyway? A goof. No different from wrapping the White House in toilet paper, if you ask me. Except

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hese guys got permits. Mies Van der Rohe, Phil, you know Mies Van ier Rohe?"

"He's dead."

"I know that. But old Mies made all those glass boxes. The ones that ot abandoned, they use 'em for target practice."

"Not all of them."

"I think Mies musta known what would happen. After all, he had four ames. *Musta been a goof in there somewhere.*" She offered him another andful and then closed the box and stuck it back in her bag. The carryvan rumbled across the bridge over the Saco River and headed up the trip that choked the main approach to North Conway.

"These guys on the link keep saying what a breakthrough this gizmo and I keep laughing," she continued. "They don't understand the historical *context,* Phil, so why the hell don't they just shut up? Nothing new nder the sun, twist and shout. The biggest goof of all." Wing noticed or the first time that her pupils were so dilated that her eyes looked ike two bottomless wells. The van slowed, caught in strip traffic; even n daylight the flash bars seemed to pulse with garish intensity.

"Me, I thought it was kinda unique." Wing could not imagine why he as talking like this.

"Oh, no, Phil. No, no. It's the international style in the sky, is what t is. Study some architecture, you'll see what I mean." The carryvan rawled into a snarl of USTS vehicles near the old North Conway railroad tation which had been moved to the airport and converted to a tourist nformation center. An electroluminescent banner hung from its Victoian gingerbread cornice. Green words flickered across it: "*Welcome to Jorth Conway in the Heart of the Mount Washington Valley Home of the Glass Cloud Welcome to . . .* " Hovers were scattered across the landing ield like seeds; tourists swarmed toward the center of town on foot. The ine of busses waiting to unload at the terminal stopped moving. After en minutes at a standstill the carryvan driver opened the doors and the assengers began to file out. When Wing rose he felt dizzy. The clown teadied him.

"Goodbye, Judy," he said as they stood blinking in the bright May unshine. "Thanks for the popcorn." He shielded his eyes with his hand; ier skin tint seemed to be glowing. "Try not to get into too much trouble."

"Gonna be a real colorful day, Phil." She leaned up and kissed him on he lips. Her breath smelled like popcorn. "It's a goof, understand? Stay vith it. Have fun."

He fell back against the bus as she pushed into the crush of people, ier polka dots saturated with shades of blue and violet, her orange hair ike a spark. As she disappeared the crowd itself began to change colors. Cerulean moms waited in bathroom lines with whining sulphur kids in

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shorts. Plum grandpas took vids while their wrinkled apricot wives shyly adjusted straw hats. Wing glanced up and the sky went green. He closed his eyes and laughed silently. She had laced the popcorn with some kind of hallucinogen. Exactly the kind of prank he should have expected. Maybe he had suspected. Was not that why he had taken the bus, to give something, anything, one last chance to happen? To make the final decision while immersed in the randomness of the world he would have to give up? Maybe he *ought* to spend this day-of-all-days twisted. He kept his eyes closed; the sun felt warm on his face. Stay with it, she had said. "Have fun," he said aloud to no one in particular.

"It's a tribute to the American genius." The vice-president of the United States shook Wing's hand. "We're all very proud of you."

Wing said, "Get out of Mexico."

Daisy tugged at his arm. "Come on, Phillip." Her voice sounded like brakes screeching.

The vice president, who was trying to pretend—in public at least—that he was not going deaf, tilted his head toward an incandescent aide in a three-piece suit. "Mexico," the aide repeated, scowling at Wing. The vice president at ninety-one was the oldest person ever to hold the office. He nodded sadly. "The tragic conflict in Mexico troubles us all, Mr. Wing. Unfortunately there are no easy answers."

Wing shook Daisy off. "We should get out and leave the PMF to sink or swim on its own." The vice-president's expression was benignly quizzical; he cupped a hand to his ear. The green room was packed with dignitaries waiting for the dedication to begin and it sounded as if every one of them was practicing a speech. "I said . . . " Wing started to repeat.

The vice-president had leaned so close that Wing could see tiny broken veins writhing like worms under his skin. "Mr. Wing," he interrupted, "have you stopped to consider how difficult we could make it for you to leave this planet?" He kept his voice low, as if they were making a deal.

"And what if I don't want to leave?"

The vice-president laughed good-naturedly. "We could make that difficult too. It's a beautiful spring day, son. Could be your day . . . if you don't go screwing yourself into the wrong socket. Ah, Senator!" Abruptly Wing was staring at the great man's back.

"What is the matter with you?" Laporte appeared beside Daisy and he was hot, a shimmering blotch of rage and four-alarm ambition. "You think you can just stagger in, twisted out of your mind, insult the vice-president—no, don't say anything. Once more, once more, Wing, and you'll be watching the Cloud from the ground, understand? This is my project now; I've worked too hard to let you screw it up again."

Wing did not care; he was too busy being pleased with himself for

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mustering the courage to confront the vice-president. He had been certain that the Secret Service would whisk him away the moment he opened his mouth. Maybe it had not done any immediate good but if people kept pestering it might have a cumulative effect. Besides it had been *fun*. The crowd swirled; like a scene-change in a dream Laporte was gone and Daisy was steering him across the room. He knew any moment someone would step aside and he would be looking down at Ndavu in his wheelchair. He glanced at Daisy; her mouth was set in a grim line, like a fresh knife wound across her face. He wondered if she were having fun, if she would ever have fun again. What was the philosophical status of fun vis-a-vis the message? A local condition of increased entropy . . .

"I must have your consent today, Phillip," said Ndavu, "or I will have to assume that your answer is no." His face looked as if it had just been waxed.

Wing had stopped worrying about the slithery thing that lived inside the Messenger. It was easier on the digestion to pretend that this human shell was Ndavu. He picked a glass of champagne off a tray carried by a passing waiter, pulled up a folding chair and sat. "You leaked my name to telelink. Told them about the project."

"There is no more time."

Wing nodded absently as he looked around the room. "I'll have to get back to you." The Governor's husband was wearing a kilt with a pattern that seemed to tumble into itself kaleidoscopically.

Ndavu touched his arm to get his attention. "It must be now, Phillip."

Wing knocked back the champagne: ersatz. "Today, Ndavu." The glass seemed to melt through his fingers; it hit the floor and bounced. More plastic. "I promise."

"Ladies and gentlemen," said a little green man wearing a bow tie, gray morning coat, roll-collar waistcoat, and striped trousers, "if I may have your attention please."

A woman from the mission whispered to Ndavu, "The vice-president's chief of protocol."

"We are opening the doors now and I want to take this opportunity to remind you once again: red invitations sit in the north stands, blue invitations to the south and gold invitations on the platform. We are scheduled to start at two-fifteen so if you would please begin to find your seats. Thank you."

Daisy and Wing were sitting in the back row on the platform. On one side was Luis Benalcazar, whose company had designed both the Cloud's ferroplastic structure and the computer program that ran it; on the other was Fred Alz, the construction super. Laporte, as official representative of the Foundation and Solon Petropolus, sat up front with the vice-president, the secretary of the interior, the governor, the junior senator and

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both of New Hampshire's congresspeople, the chief selectman of North Conway, a Hampton fourth-grader who had won an essay contest, the Bishop of Manchester, and a famous poet whom Wing had never heard of. Ndavu's wheelchair was off to one side.

The introductions, benedictions, acknowledgments and appreciations took the better part of an hour. . . . *A technological marvel which is at one with the natural environment* . . . The afternoon seemed to get hotter with every word, a nightmare of rhetoric as hell. . . . *the world will come to appreciate what we have known all along, that the Granite State is the greatest* . . . On a whim he tried to look into the dazzling sun but the colors nearly blinded him. . . . *their rugged grandeur cloaked in coniferous cloaks* . . . When Wing closed his eyes he could see a bright web of pulsing arteries and veins. . . . *this magnificent work of art balanced on a knife edge of electromagnetic energy* . . . Daisy kept squeezing his hand as if she were trying to pump appropriate reactions out of him. Meanwhile Benalcazar, whose English was not very good, fell asleep and started to snore. . . . *Reminds me of a story that the Speaker of the House used to tell* . . . When they mentioned Wing's name he stood up and bowed.

He could hear the applause for the Cloud several moments before it drifted over the hangar and settled toward the landing platform. It cast a cool shadow over the proceedings. Wing had imagined that he would feel something profound at this dramatic moment in his career but his first reaction was relief that the speeches were over and he was getting out of the sun.

The Cloud was designed to look like a cumulus puff but the illusion was only sustained for the distant viewer. Close up, anyone could see that it was an artifact. It moved with the ponderous grace of an enormous hover, to which it was a technological cousin. But while a hover was a rigid aerobody designed for powered flight, the Cloud was amorphous and a creature of the wind. Wing liked to call it a building that sailed. Its opaline outer envelope was ultrathin Stresslar, laminated to a ferroplastic grid based on an octagonal module. When Benalcazar's computer program directed current through the grid, some ferroplastic fibers went slack while others stiffened to form the Cloud's undulating structure. The size of the envelope could be increased or decreased depending on load factors and wind velocity; in effect it could be reefed like a sail. It used the magnetic track as a combination of rudder and keel or, when landing, as an anchor. Like a hover its envelope enclosed a volume of pressurized helium for lift: 20,000 cubic meters.

The Cloud slowly settled to within two meters of the ground, bottom flattening, the upper envelope billowing into the blue sky. Wing realized that people had stopped applauding and an awed hush had settled onto

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the platform. The Hampton schoolgirl climbed onto a folding chair and stood twisting her prize-winning essay into an irretrievable tatter. Wing himself could feel the gooseflesh stippling his arms now; the chill of the Cloud's shadow was strangely sobering. The secretary of the interior sank slowly onto his chair, shielded his eyes with the flat of his hand and stared up like a coal miner in Manhattan. Pictures would never do the Cloud justice. The governor whispered something to the bishop, who did not seem to be paying attention. Wing shivered. Like some miracle out of the Old Testament, the Cloud had swollen into a pillar that was at least twenty stories tall. It had accomplished this transformation without making a sound.

Fred Alz nudged Wing in the ribs. "Guess we got their attention, eh Phil?" The slouch-backed old man stood straight. Wing supposed it was pride puffing Alz up; he could not quite bring himself to share it.

Daisy squeezed his hand. "It's so quiet."

"Ssshh!" The governor's husband turned and glared.

The silence was the one element of the design that Wing had never fully imagined. In fact, he had been willing to compromise on a noisier reefing mechanism to hold down costs but Laporte, of all people, had talked him out of it. Not until he had seen the first tests of the completed Cloud did Wing realize the enormous psychological impact of silence when applied to large bodies in motion. It gave the Cloud a surreal, slightly ominous power, as if it were the ghost of a great building. It certainly helped to compensate for the distressing way the Stresslar envelope changed from pearl to cheapjack plastic iridescence in certain angles of light. The engineers, technicians, and fabricators had worked technological wonders to create a quiet Cloud; although Wing approved, it had not been part of his original vision. The reaction of the crowd was another bittersweet reminder that this was not his Cloud, that he had lost his Cloud the day he had begun to draw it.

The octagonal geometry of the structural grid came clear as the pilot hardened the Cloud in preparation for boarding. Ndavu wheeled up noiselessly and offered his hand in congratulations. They shook but Wing avoided eye contact for fear that the alien might detect Wing's estrangement from his masterpiece. A hole opened in the envelope and a tube snaked out; the ground crew coupled it to the landing platform. Ndavu shook hands with Alz and spoke to Luis Benalcazar in Spanish. Smiling and nodding, Benalcazar stooped toward the Messenger to reply. "He says," Ndavu translated, "that this is the culmination of his career. For him, there will never be another project like it."

"For all of us," said Alz.

"Thank you," Benalcazar hugged Wing. "Phillip. So much." A woman with a microcam came to the edge of the platform to record the embrace.

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Wing pulled away from Benalcazar. "You, Luis," he tapped the engineer on the chest and then pointed at the Cloud. "It's your baby. Without you, it's a flying tent." "Big goddamn tent yes," said Benalcazar, laughing uncertainly. Laporte was shaking hands with the congressman from the First District. The chief of protocol stood near the entrance of the tube and began motioning for people to climb through to the passenger car suspended within the envelope. Before anyone could board, however, Ndavu backed away from Wing, Benalcazar, and Alz and began to clap. Daisy stepped to the Messenger's side and joined in, raising hands over her head like a cheerleader. People turned to see what was going on and then everyone was applauding.

It felt wrong to Wing—like an attack, as if each clap were a blow he had to withstand. He thought it was too late to clap now. Perhaps if the applause could echo backwards through the years, so that a nervous young man on a stony path might hear it and take sustenance from it, things might have been different. But that man's ears were stopped by time and he was forever alienated from these people. These people who did not realize how they were being manipulated by Ndavu. These people who were clapping for the wrong cloud. Wing's cloud was not this glorified special effect. His cloud was forever lonely, lost as it wandered, windborne, past sheer walls of granite: a daydream. You can't build a dream out of Stresslar and ferroplastic, he told himself. You can't share your dreams. He thought that Daisy looked very pretty, clapping for him. She was wearing the blue dress that he had bought for her in Boston. She had been mad at him for spending so much money; they had fought over it. The glowing clearwater blue of the material picked up the blue in her eyes; it had always been his favorite. Daisy had taken five years of his life away and he was back now to where he had been before he met her. She was not his wife. This was not his cloud. These were not his people. He found himself thinking then about the alien goddess Teaqua, a creature of such transcendent luminosity that she could order Messengers to run her errands. He wondered if she could look into the sun.

"Tell him to stop it," Wing said to Daisy. "Tell him I'll go."

The applause ended. Several hours later on Infoline's evening report, Hubert Fields noted in passing that the architect was not among those who boarded the Glass Cloud for its maiden voyage. ●

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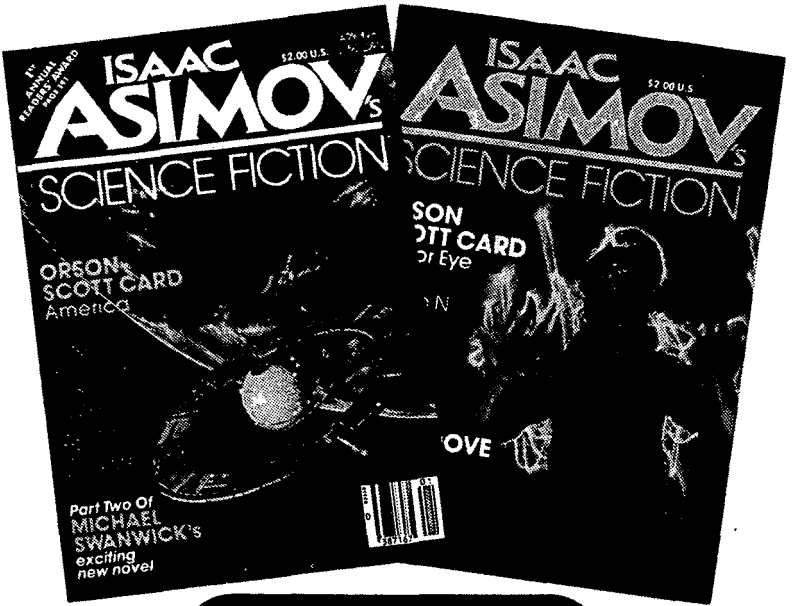

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ON BOOKS by Baird Searles

Anachronography

The Folk of the Air
By Peter Beagle
Del Rey, $15.95

As one might expect, Peter Beagle's first novel since *The Last Unicorn* (eighteen years ago now!) is not what one might expect.

In some ways, *The Folk of the Air* is very unfashionable. Beagle takes his time about getting started; for almost the first hundred pages, there's almost no suspicion of anything fantastical. It's the leisurely account of the return of one Joe Farrell, rolling stone and dedicated lutenist—lutist? luter?—lute-player, to his old college town in Northern Cal. He moves in with a close friend, Ben, and Ben's lover, an older Greek woman named Sia.

Oh, the windows of the old house in which they live seem to move around and multiply, and so do the rooms at times, and Sia's dog Briseis has some odd quirks of behavior. But Farrell is too busy fighting nostalgia, rediscovering his old haunts after a decade, getting and dropping jobs (one at Thumper's, the fast food fried-rabbit emporium, home of Cottontail Crispies) to care much—he's a tolerant and easygoing sort, not one to worry unduly about supernatural manifestations.

But when he runs into the on-again, off-again love of his life, Julie Tanikawa, and she introduces him into the League For Archaic Pleasures, things start to happen. It seems that half the townsfolk are creative anachronists, and as Farrell begins to find out, some of them are not as anachronistic as they might be. He runs into Ben dressed in Norse gear at a gathering on the greensward, and Ben does not recognize him. As it turns out, Ben is periodically taken over (not unwillingly) by the *persona* of a ninth century Icelander.

Even worse is the scrawny and extremely unpleasant female adolescent known in the League as Aiffe of Scotland, daughter of the current "King" of the group. Aiffe has rather strong supernatural powers, and has conjured up someone (or something) very nasty that appears to be a radiantly handsome teenaged boy named Nicholas Bonner. He urges Aiffe on to ever more unpleasant deeds involving the League (even before his arrival she has already driven one

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member mad), and there is a sudden confrontation with Ben's lover Sia which makes Farrell realize that Sia is a being of some incredible age and power herself, and that there is a bond of some sort between her and the creature known as Bonner.

Aiffe imports some killers from the past into a supposedly harmless League "war," and there is a death, though most of the League members refuse to believe the evidence of their senses that real warriors out of history were responsible. Joe, Julie, and Ben combine to thwart Aiffe and Bonner. Things come to a head at the annual tourney to choose a new "King," and the immortal Sia finally confronts Aiffe and Bonner in a magical contest in her house of endless rooms.

Beagle has done a neat job of combining ageless magic and magical beings with the *vin ordinaire* of contemporary life in California, using the device of creative anachronism as a linkage. If creative anachronists give you the pip, as representatives of the endlessly adolescent of California, you might have a problem with *The People of the Air*. But Beagle himself, through his hero, has a fairly jaundiced view of the scene, and is often snidely funny about it. And he seems incapable of writing a sentence/paragraph/page/chapter lacking in charm; the novel is continually humorous and thoroughly engaging, as are his characters (except the nasties, of course). Here there is style, that element so woefully lacking in so many of the cloned fantasies we're getting these days.

Mass Produced Mankind

The Genesis Quest & Second Genesis

By Donald Moffitt

Del Rey, $3.50 each (paper)

The Nar are nice people. They look like something out of a Lovecraft abyss, all stalk and tentacles (five on top and five on the bottom) and eyes (five around the middle), but their hearts are in the right place (figuratively speaking, of course). In the process of searching beyond their planet for signals of extraNarial life they get a signal from another galaxy that originated thirty-seven million years ago; the message goes on for a century and the long-winded race responsible is, of course, humanity.

The message stops in mid-sentence, but it has included, in addition to an astonishing amount of knowledge that will give the Nar interstellar travel among other things, a genetic blueprint for creating humans. The kindly Nar, suspecting that something drastic has happened to mankind, decide to recreate it, little knowing what they've got themselves in for.

After a millennia or so, they're the proud creators of a sizable colony of humans, with their culture more or less intact (the Ravel quartet, King James Bible, and tomato). Inevitably, humanity turns out to be revolting: ungrateful, resentful of the Nar, and violence-

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prone. Not everybody, of course, but enough to make a very nasty situation when the revolutionists try to take over one of the enormous (eighty miles long) live trees which the Nar use to travel between the stars.

Involved in all this, more or less unwittingly, is the human Bram, a bio-technician who dreams of going back to humanity's birthstar to find out what happened, and who comes across a secret in the Nar archives which just might make this possible.

Donald Moffitt's *The Genesis Quest* is best when it's telling us about the Nar. They're a fetching race despite their looks, and their culture has a lot of intriguing aspects to it, not the least of which are the enormous tree-ships which live in deep space (*pace*, Larry Niven). It's the long-winded humans who are the problem. Carrying on the tradition of that hundred-year-long message from the original crowd, all of the mass-produced new ones lecture instead of talk, and go on endlessly about politics and science. Bram is particularly nitwitted, getting involved with the unpleasant humanity-firsters through a pernicious female that any adolescent could have seen through (she loves him for his biological knowhow, useful to the cause).

For once, a sequel appeared hard on the heels of the first book. No waiting around for *Second Genesis* (it appeared a month after *The Genesis Quest*). I wish I could say this might be a trend, but there's the uneasy suspicion that it was all done as one long novel, and split into two publishable volumes. In any case, Bram and a good percentage of the recreated human race do indeed take off for the old home galaxy in one of the Nar's treeships. They get there after dodging a black hole or two, and what they find, wild horses couldn't drag out of me (the reviewer's code, you know—no revealing the identity of the murderer, or what surprises are to be found in our galaxy some seventy million years in the future). Let's say it's a sort of Nivenly hash, with a dash of Fuzzies and a nymph or two (no, there are *other* kinds of nymphs). Take my word for it, though—it's lots of fun, at least when the humans stop talking and start discovering things.

Likable Unlikelies

The Unlikely Ones
By Mary Brown
McGraw-Hill, $15.95

There's a dragon whose long sought-after five precious gems have been stolen, which means he won't be able to return to Dragon Home and become a Master Dragon.

There's a unicorn who has lost its horn in defense of a beloved Prince, against a really nasty witch; his Prince lies enthralled, and the unicorn is powerless without its horn. There's a knight, who has repulsed the advances of a really nasty witch and who's been cursed with rusty armor and the inability to fulfill his desires, among other

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bad things. There's a hunchbacked girl, ugly "as a pig's behind," who lives enslaved by a really nasty witch, along with a crow, a kitten, a toad, and a golden carp, with all of whom the girl communicates. The witch controls them by means of five magic "pebbles" embedded in their flesh.

I would guess you can already see the pattern. Mary Brown, in *The Unlikely Ones*, very much uses the stuff of fairy tales, and lays out her quite lengthy novel as symmetrically as any tale of three wishes, or three brothers, or that crowd that went in search of courage, brains, a heart, and passage back to Kansas.

"Thing," the hunchback, escapes from the witch with her animal friends, and *of course* runs into the unicorn, and *of course* runs into the knight. They all seek out an ancient wizard, who *of course* sets them on a quest, with the promise that a dragon will probably provide some answers. And on this quest each of them in turn has a chance to prove him/her/itself by meeting a crisis (trolls, sea serpents, a "castle of fair delights" chock full of sadists, etc.)

At the bottom of the novel is a children's fairy story. But Ms. Brown has done some pretty strange things on top of this. There's a good deal of violence and sex (three guesses as to the knight's problem with "unfulfilled desires") as well as passing allusions to urination and defecation.

Nevertheless, somehow she's kept the charm of it all; this is not one of those smartass, hip, updated fairy tales. Her characters are immensely appealing; the adventures, as predictable as they may be in general, are each surprising; the solution, as expected as it is, is still very satisfying; and there is a sort of longish denouement, as the little band breaks up, that is really quite touching.

It should be said that the author is obviously very into animals, and that animals play a large part throughout. But her talking fauna never achieve the toothgrating stickiness of the Disney types (though the goldfish comes perilously close at times). However, non-animal lovers may just find all this anthropomorphism a bit much. And on a personal note—I'd already decided the book was engaging, despite (or because of) its mad mixture of raunch, silliness, intelligence, cliché, and originality, before I got to the penultimate chapter. Here, in their last adventure, the hero and heroine adopt a pup, half wolf, half dog of great and ancient lineage, which they name Bran. Now, this happens to be the name of my own favorite canine, a companion of twelve years. I could have taken great exception to this; the proof of the pudding is that I didn't.

Soft-Boiled Detective

A Death of Honor
By Joe Clifford Faust
Del Rey, $3.50 (paper)

It opens with a female body on the floor. Who is she? and whodun-

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nit? are the questions facing our hero, Payne, whose apartment floor it happens to be, in Joe Clifford Faust's *A Death of Honor*. If you think that's an opening worthy of one of those classic Chandler/Bogart detective thrillers, the rest of the book attempts to maintain the resemblance.

The time is a dreary near future of brownouts, power shortages, and refugees from Russian-occupied Britain, and murder is taken so much for granted that the much-invoked thirty-second Amendment to the Constitution empowers civilians to do their own crime-solving—every man his own Marlowe, as it were. So the action speeds in and out of the sex-and-dance discos which are the major source of recreation, and the dismal apartment buildings with nonworking elevators, as Payne tracks down the killer.

Like the Chandler novels, confusion threatens to reign as the bodies pile up, and it's augmented by the fact that Payne is a biochemist (it's like Bogart combined with Edward G. Robinson as Dr. Ehrlich discovering syphilis). With a lot of lab work (and a large dollop of technical biochemistry, which doesn't help the confusion factor), the murder weapon turns out to be an artificially created microorganism transmitted venereally. The rules of the game aren't all that clear, either; why Payne, who is never really suspected of the first killing and who is classed as a "secondary victim," takes on the case is as much of a mystery as the murder. But I've noticed that lack of clarity doesn't seem to bother fans of the hard-boiled detective school. So if you cross genres in that direction, this might amuse, even if the hero is more of a three-minute egg.

100 Count 'Em 100

Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels

By David Pringle

Carroll and Graf, $14.95

Everybody likes to indulge in the game of the ten best this and the fifty best that; however, it takes some courage to publish such a list. Inevitably, it's subjective and nobody but *nobody* is going to agree with your choices. I know from experience—luckily the list I published of the basic SF books was done in collaboration with three other people, so I could always blame them when I got the question of "How could you include a dog like ————?"

We only included fifty books, which gave only fifty chances of disagreement; David Pringle, in his *Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels*, has doubled that. As noted, this is of necessity a subjective list. All a reviewer can do is give Mr. Pringle's credentials, and note any general biases, with the *caveat* that any judgments on *his* judgments are just as subjective.

David Pringle is editor of the British SF magazine, *Interzone*; he also edits the very scholarly periodical, *Foundation*, and has done a bibliography of J. G. Ballard—so

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that should give a clue as to where *he's* at. For each of his hundred, he provides a two-page essay including a synopsis, and a basic bibliography. They are arranged chronologically, and the earliest novel cited is Orwell's *1984*, which was published in 1949. He justifies this rather late date by saying that it was only about then that SF began appearing in book form rather than in magazines. True enough, but it still eliminates a lot of great stuff, such as the "Golden-Age" *Astounding* serials and the novels of Olaf Stapledon.

He shows a definite bias towards mainstream writers who have taken a science fictional idea (usually not original) and presumably by their greater writing skills, made them into literature. In my experience, these may be literature but more often than not, they're pretty boring SF—*1984* is a classic case. Others on the list are Stewart's *Earth Abides*, William Burroughs' *Nova Express*, Golding's *The Inheritors*, Frank's *Alas, Babylon* and Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*.

This, in fact, seems to be part of a larger bias toward the intellectual, and away from the adventurous, glamorous, or extravagant, i.e., that for which so many of us read SF. Jack Vance, for instance, is not included, and Leigh Brackett, the fabulous "Queen of Space Opera," is represented by her most atypical work, *The Long Tomorrow* (though it indeed deserves the recognition). Within those limitations though, one can hardly quarrel with Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Delany's *Nova*, Aldiss' *Hothouse*, and many others of the magic hundred. And Pringle writes a damn good synopsis, and that's praise from one who knows all too well just how difficult it can be, particularly in science fiction.

Shoptalk

From The Smithsonian Institution Press comes a heavyweight piece of nonfiction of interest to the SF community: *Envoys of Mankind* by George Robinson (who was awarded the first doctorate in space law, from McGill University) and Harold M. White, Jr.; it's subtitled "A Declaration of First Principles for the Governance of Space Societies." It's a broad but thorough study of potential societal changes for communal life in space stations, from psychology to legality. The prologue is by Gene Roddenberry (?—whose TV credentials I have all the respect in the world for, but whose academic/intellectual credentials I am less sure of; why not one of the more weighty thinkers in *written* SF?) (Smithsonian Institution Press, $19.95).

Three anthologies a bit off the beaten track from the usual catch-as-catch-can-collections: *Tales From the Spaceport Bar* edited by George H. Scithers and Darrell Schweitzer for the bibulously rollicking patrons of Gavagan's and the White Hart (Avon, $3.50, paper); *Alternative Histories* edited by Charles G. Waugh and Martin H. Greenberg for the large number of read-

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ers who like variations on the themes of the past (Garland, $19.95); and *In the Field of Fire* edited by Jeanne Van Buren Dann and Jack Dann, original stories using the Vietnam War era as a central theme (Tor, $17.95).

All four of the Hitchhiker (*'s Guide To the Galaxy*) novels by Douglas Adams are now available in an hard-cover omnibus volume. *The Hitchhiker's Quartet* also includes a never-before-published short story, "Young Zaphod Plays It Safe" (Harmony Books, $19.95) . . . *The Phantom of the Opera*, the novel by Gaston Leroux, is available again, and if you liked the movie(s), you'll love the book. It's high *fin de siecle* camp melodrama, with a lot of scenes and subplots the film(s) didn't, of course, have time for (Warner's, $2.95, paper).

About-bloody-time dept.: Brian Aldiss has finally updated his fine history of SF, published as *Billion Year Spree* back in the '70s. It now appears as *Trillion Year Spree* and is "very much revised, altered and enlarged," according to the foreword. It's also as wonderfully thought out and as infuriatingly opinionated as the original—the iconoclastic section on recent Heinlein works is bound to have some people (probably including RAH) up in arms. But it's good to have an available history of the field one can recommend (Atheneum, $24.95, illustrated).

I'm probably opening a can of worms by bringing this up, and I sure don't want to set a precedent, but there's this—er—"computerized novel" called *Amnesia* by Thomas M. Disch. The interactive novel was the briefest of fads, but most of those were based on already existing written works. The publisher says that *Amnesia* is the first computerized novel, presumably meaning the first *original* such to be written (created) by a novelist, not by a programmer. Disch is one of our better writers, dating back to the dear dead days when style actually meant something in the field, and so his words are worth reading, whether they're on a page, a screen, or a john wall. One begins *Amnesia* by waking nude in a hotel room in New York with no memory of who one is. From there, it's a search through the streets of the city (subway and street map provided) and some of Disch's typically unpleasant milieux and events to ascertain one's identity. Myself, I didn't have the patience to get out of the hotel room, but if you're a Disch fan with a home computer and lots of time to spare, the struggle may be worth the effort (Electronic Arts, $39.95 or $44.95, depending on which computer you have).

Update on the complicated Underwood-Miller *The Collected Stories of Philip K. Dick* whose various editions I noted as forthcoming some months back. It was finally published in *five* volumes, the regular trade edition of which is priced at $125. Apologies for the misinformed earlier notice—it was based

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entirely on advance information provided by the publisher.

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Neanderthals: Isaac Asimov's Wonderful Worlds of Science Fiction #6* edited by Robert Silverberg, Martin H. Greenberg, and Charles Waugh (Signet, $3.95, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, % The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10014. ●

NEXT ISSUE

It's back to Hell again in our next issue, with our July cover story, "The Fascination of the Abomination," another Gilgamesh story by Hugo-and-Nebula winner **Robert Silverberg.** Silverberg's last Gilgamesh story for us, "Gilgamesh in the Outback," was one of the most popular stories we published last year, and is currently a Finalist for this year's Nebula Award. This series follows the adventures of Gilgamesh the King in the lands beyond the veil of death in Hell itself, a lively and fascinating place bristling with strange wonders and stranger dangers, and packed with the most famous of the Departed, who meet and interact in the most surprising of ways. In "The Fascination of the Abomination," Gilgamesh penetrates into the innermost circles of Hell, where only the elite of the Damned dare to go.... From the Hell of myth and legend, Hugo-and-Nebula winner **James Tiptree, Jr.** takes us to a hell on earth, a man-made hell, the hell of war, in "Yanqui Doodle," one of the most harrowing stories you are likely to read this year.

Also in July: **Neal Barrett, Jr.** has one of the wildest imaginations in science fiction today, and he returns next issue with "Highbrow," one of the strangest and most surprising stories we've seen in quite a while; **Karen Joy Fowler** takes us beyond those thrilling days of yesteryear for a very funny look at "The Faithful Companion at Forty"; **Andrew Weiner** examines the implications of a strange kind of time travel in "Rider"; and **Lawrence Watt-Evans,** in his *IAsfm* debut, tells us the wry and poignant tale of "Why I Left Harry's All-Night Hamburgers"—the answer will surprise you. Plus an array of columns and features. Look for the July issue on your newsstands on June 2, 1987.

COMING UP: new stories by **Kim Stanley Robinson, Lucius Shepard, Lisa Goldstein, George Alec Effinger, Orson Scott Card, Howard Waldrop, Steven Popkes, Jack Dann,** and others, plus, COMING SOON: the first-ever publication of **Harlan Ellison's** *I, Robot: The Movie.*

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Lots of cons this time, including a couple in France. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, & a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's a good time to phone cons (most are home numbers) (be polite). Send an SASE when writing cons. For free listing, tell me about your con 6 months ahead. Look for me behind the Filthy Pierre badge.

APRIL, 1987

23-25—**International SF Conference.** For info, write: **D. Terrel, Fac. des Bel. Let., U. de Nice, B. P. 369, Nice 06007, France.** Or call: **(703) 823-3117** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Nice, France (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: None announced.

24-26—**SwampCon. (504) 342-1337/5353 day, 355-8246/346-1011 eve.** Ramada Inn, Baton Rouge LA.

24-26—**Contretemps.** Holiday Inn, Council Bluffs IA. Joe ("Forever War") & G. Haldeman, D. Cherry.

29-May 5—**Festival SF, B. P. 611, Metz 57010, France.** Telephone **87 36 69 16.** Jeter, Pelot.

MAY, 1987

1-3—**Contraption** Hilton, Southfield MI. G.R.R. Martin, fan Mike Glicksohn.

1-3—**AmigoCon. (915) 566-1733.** Holiday Inn Sunland Park, El Paso TX. S. R. Donaldson, R. Musgrave.

8-10—**MarCon. (614) 475-0158 or 442-1010.** Radisson Hotel, Columbus OH. Heavy on parties & music.

8-11—**FilkCon. (301) 593-6247.** Radisson Hotel, Wilmington DE. Annual East Coast SF folksinging con.

15-17—**Kubla Khan, 647 Devon Dr., Nashville, TN 37220. (615) 297-5740/832-8402.** Strong art show.

15-17—**Conquest, Box 36212, Kansas City MO 64111.** J. Varley, C. J. Cherryh, Suzette Hayden Elgin.

15-17—**KeyCon, Box 3178, Winnipeg MB R3C 4E6.** Keith (Retief) Laumer, Barry (Enemy Mine) Longyear.

22-24—**VCon, Box 48478, Bentall Sta., Vancouver BC V7X 1A2. (604) 738-8356.** S. Moskowitz.

22-25—**DisClave, 65-C Ridge Rd., Greenbelt MD 20770.** New Carrollton MD (near Wash. DC). G. Wolfe.

AUGUST, 1987

27-Sep. 2—**Conspiracy, 23 Kensington Ct., Hempstead NY 11550.** In UK: WorldCon. Lessing, Bester.

SEPTEMBER, 1987

5-8—**CactusCon, Box 27201, Tempe AZ 85282.** Phoenix AZ. 1987 NASFiC. $40 advance, $50 at door.

SEPTEMBER, 1988

1-5—**NoLaCon II, 921 Canal 831, New Orleans LA 70182. (504) 821-2362.** $50 to 6/30, then $60.

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** Boston MA. WorldCon. $50 to 9/7.

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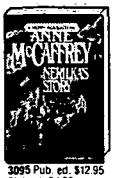

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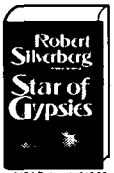

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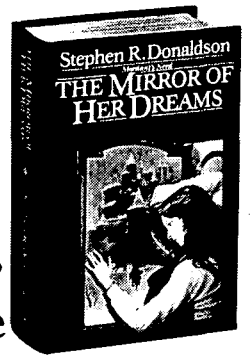

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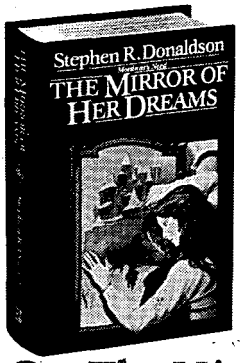

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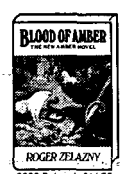

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